

Svādhyāya: Studying Hindu Holy Books



Author - Vishal Agarwal

Chapter - 1

The Hindu tradition lays great stress on the study of scriptures-svādhyāya. It is considered a religious duty for Hindus to study and recite their scriptures on a daily basis, if possible. The Hindu tradition lays great stress on the study of scriptures. It is considered a religious duty for Hindus to study and recite their scriptures on a daily basis, if possible. In particular, Hindu priests are required to recite their own designated group of scriptures (called ‘svādhyāya’) every day, and even multiple times every day because that is what grants them the status of priesthood.

Shruti and Smriti are the two eyes of Brahmanas. He who is bereft of one is one eyed, and if bereft of both, is completely

blind – thus it is said.” *Vādhūla Smṛiti*,
verse 197

Hindu scriptures assign five great daily duties for all householders, and the very first one of them is the Brahmajajna, or the daily study and recitation of scriptures, in particular, the Vedas.

Lord Krishna enunciates the study of sacred scriptures as one of the 26 attributes of one who is endowed with divine wealth.

“Absence of fear, Purity of heart and Mind, Steadfastness in the path of Spiritual Wisdom, Charity, Control over one’s senses, Performance of Vedic sacrifices, **Study of Holy Scriptures**, Austerity and Straightforwardness” *Gita 16.1*

“Ahimsa, Truth, Absence of Anger, Renunciation, Peacefulness, Absence of Backbiting or Crookedness, Compassion

towards all Creatures, Absence of Covetousness, Gentleness, Modesty (Decency), Absence of Fickleness (or immaturity).” ***Gita 16.2***

“Vigor and Energy, Forgiveness, Fortitude, Cleanliness (external and internal), and Absence of too much pride – These belong to the One who is born to achieve Divine Wealth, O Bhārata!” ***Gita 16.3***

Millions of Hindus recite ‘Om’, the Gayatri Mantra, the Purusha Sūkta (Rigveda 10.90), Stotras (hymns in praise of different deities), or sing devotional hymns, or study their holy books on a daily basis as an act of piety and to earn religious merit.

During the convocation ceremony, the Vedic teacher, therefore exhorts his student to continue studying and teaching the scriptures everyday even after they have graduated and have left the school. The

Upanishad says that while performing various religious duties and practicing virtues, we must at all times continue svādhyāya and pravachana (teaching to others).

Righteousness, and study and teaching (are to be practiced). Truth (should be adhered to), and study and teaching (are to be practiced). Austerity, and study and teaching (are to be practiced). Control over senses, and study and teaching (are to be practiced). Control over the mind, and study and teaching (are to be practiced). The Vedic ceremonial fires (are to be kept lit), and learning and teaching (are to be practiced). The Agnihotra or Vedic twilight worship (is to be performed), and study and teaching (are to be practiced). The guests, scholars, and the needy (are to be served), and study and teaching (are to be practiced). Humans (should be served and interacted with

appropriately), and study and learning (are to be practiced).....***Taittiriya Upanishad 1.9***

Hindu scriptures themselves equate the study of scriptures to acts of worship, and the fruit of studying and reciting scriptures is said to be considerable. They say: They studied the Riks and thereby offered milk to the Devas. The Devas then manifested. With the study of Yajus, the Rishis made the offerings of clarified butter; with Samans, made an offering of Soma; with the Atharva Angiras, the made the offering of honey. With the study of Brahmanas, Itihāsa, Nārāshaṃsī, Gāthā, Kalpa and Purāṇa, they offered animal fat to the Devas. When the Devas manifested, they destroyed hunger and other evils, and then returned to heaven. By means of this Brahmajajna, the Rishis attained proximity to the Supreme Being. **(Taittirīya Āraṇyaka 2.9.2)**

If a twice born recites the Rigveda daily, he offers milk and honey (so to speak) to the Devas and honey and Ghee to his ancestors. If he studies the Yajurveda daily, he offers Ghee and water to the Devas, and Grains and honey to his ancestors. If he studies the Samaveda daily, he satisfies the Devas with Soma and Ghee, and satisfies his ancestors with honey and Ghee. If he studies the Atharvaveda daily, he offers butter to the Devas and honey and Ghee to the ancestors. He who studies the Vākovākya, Purāṇas, Nārashamsi (ballads), Gāthās, Itihāsas and different sciences offers meat, milk, honey and porridge to the ancestors. Satisfied with these offerings, the Devas and ancestors bestow desired fruits to the regular student of the scriptures. He who is ever devoted to the study of scriptures obtains the fruit of whatever yajna (Vedic religious ceremony) he performs, the fruit of donating the entire

earth filled with treasures and food thrice,
and obtains the fruit of performing
numerous austerities. *Yajnavalkya Smriti*
1.41-48

Chanting the Scriptures:

This study of the sacred Hindu literature can
occur in many ways –

1. ***Japa*** or chanting of ‘Om’ and
selected passages (such as the Purusha
Sūkta from the Rigveda), stotras
(devotional hymns to various Deities)
from holy books with attentiveness and
reverence, and paying attention to the
meaning and significance of the words
recited. In most cases, the focus is on
chanting as an act of devotion, without
paying much attention to the meaning
although the latter too is strongly
recommended.

2. ***Svādhyāya:*** In ancient times (and to a limited extent even today), different families studied a specific set of scriptures from the entire corpus of Hindu sacred literature. For example, a family belonging to the Deshastha Brahmana community in Maharashtra (India) could chant a specific group of 10 scriptures related to the Rigveda (the Rigveda Samhitā, Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, Aitareya Āraṇyaka, Aitareya Upanishad, Āshvalāyana Shrauta Sūtra, Āshvalāyana Grhya Sūtra, Panini's Aṣṭādhyāyī, Pingala's Chhandasūtra, Yāska's Nirukta and Kātyāyana's Sarvānukramaṇī) during their lifelong study of scriptures. This same set of scriptures was studied by the members of the family as their primary focus generation after generation and constituted their traditional scriptural study or Svādhyāya. In this form of study

too, the focus is on the recitation of the sacred texts, and not necessarily on their meaning.

3. ***Adhyayana*** or study of scriptures in general to imbibe their teachings, and reflect upon their meaning. There may or may not be any chanting involved. The student may study them privately, or under the guidance of a Guru.

The three terms are however used interchangeably. For example, the word ‘adhyayana’ is often used to denote the corpus of texts that are recited during ‘Svādhyāya’. Likewise, Japa is also often used to denote svādhyāya.

A lot of times, Hindus recite and study scriptures without reflecting upon their meaning. This method of reciting scriptural passages from memory mechanically as a ritualistic or a devotional act, without

pondering over their meaning, is a good preliminary step towards studying them and acquiring familiarity with their contents. But we must not stop at that.

Importance of Knowing the Meaning of our Scriptures:

Hindu scriptures criticize those who merely chant the scriptures like parrots without trying to understanding their meaning. They say –

He, who having learned the Veda does not know its meaning is like a pillar which merely carries a burden, because only he who knows the meaning attains the auspiciousness and the holy, having got rid of all his sins through wisdom (contained in the meaning of the words). **Sage Yāska's Nirukta 1.18; Rigveda's Shāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka 14.2**

An ignorant man has eyes to see but sees nothing, has ears to hear but hears nothing, has a tongue to speak but speaks nothing. The ignorant can never understand the hidden mysteries of knowledge. But it is to the learned alone that knowledge reveals its true nature, just as a woman longing to meet her husband, dresses in her best and puts on her finest jewelry, so as to display her charms to him. **Rigveda 10.17.4**

Only he who knows (and not merely recites) the Vedic mantras knows the Deities because the Deity does not accept the ceremonial offering that is made without knowledge. **Rishi Shaunaka's Brihaddevatā 7.130,132**

Therefore, one must try to understand the meaning of scriptural passages too. But even and chanting and knowing the meaning of the scriptures is not sufficient. Hindu

tradition states that the study of our holy books involves five activities:

Fivefold is the practice of Vedas: First is learning it from a teacher, second is contemplation, third is their practice (acting per their teachings and performing the rituals taught by them), fourth is their recitation (Japa) and the fifth is teaching them to one's own disciple. **Daksha Smriti 2.31**

Knowledge is acquired and mastered in 4 steps – during the period of study, during the period of self-reflection on what is taught, during the period of teaching it to others, and while practicing it. **Mahābhāshya of Patanjali**

In other words, the learning of the letter and the meaning of scriptures must be followed by self-reflection, teaching it to others, and application of the teachings in our daily

lives. The daily study of scriptures, and the performance of our daily duties are closely inter-related, and they illuminate and reinforce each other.

Chapter - 2

Benefits of Studying our Scriptures

Means of attaining all the goals of our Life

Hindu Dharma states that every human being should have four aims in life: Artha (material possessions), Kāma (gratification of senses), Dharma (piety, performing one's duty) and Moksha (liberation from the cycle of births and deaths). These goals might seem mutually irreconcilable, but the scriptures provide ways and means and frameworks for our lives and the society so that all of them can be achieved in a harmonious manner.

With the eyes of knowledge, a wise man should closely examine all the sources of Dharma, and then determine and practice that Dharma which is in accordance with the

Vedas. **Manusmriti 2.8.**

Following the Dharma taught in the Shruti and the Smriti, one obtains great fame in this life, and attains a state of great happiness upon death. Manusmriti 2.9

By Shruti is meant the Veda, and by Smriti is meant the Dharmashāstra. Dharma has originated from these two main sources, and therefore one should not find fault in them unnecessarily. **Manusmriti 2.10**

The four varnas, the three worlds, the four ashramas, the past, present and future are all known well through the Vedas alone.

Manusmriti 12.97

The Vedas sustains all creatures and promotes their success/progress – therefore I consider the Vedas as the best means of attaining one's goals. **Manusmriti 12.99**

“... A young man working in Indian Army could not find any meaning in life and so contemplated suicide while sitting on a bench at Delhi Railway Station. But, suddenly he remembered that his sister was to get married shortly. So, he decided to postpone his suicide mission until the marriage of his sister. Next day, he went to a book shop to purchase newspaper when he came across a book by Swami Vivekananda which contained many inspiring thoughts like – ‘This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient. They alone live who live for others; the rest are more dead than alive.’ He made up his mind to live for others. Afterwards he took premature retirement from Army and received Rs. 65,000/ – as retirement benefits. He went to his village in Maharashtra and utilized this money to repair the village temple. With the temple as the focal point, he mobilized public opinion

and stopped all liquor outlets in the village despite stiff resistance from the vested interests. He educated the villagers, both young and old, and started many economic projects. In a few years, his village was declared an ideal village by the Government. The Maharashtra Government then released grant for transforming some more villages. The name of the village is Ralegaon Siddhi and the person's name is Anna Hazare. He was awarded Padmasri and then Padma Bhushan for his work. Just a small book by Swami Vivekananda gave a new direction in Anna Hazare's life.”[1]

Golden Standard for judging Good from Evil

Scriptures, and especially the Vedas, are the yardstick by which we measure the morality of our actions and judge whether we are right or wrong.

With the eyes of knowledge, a wise man should closely examine all the sources of Dharma, and then determine and practice that Dharma which is in accordance with the Vedas. Manusmriti 2.8 By Shruti is meant the Veda, and by Smriti is meant the Dharmashāstra. Dharma has originated from these two main sources, and therefore one should not find fault in them unnecessarily. Manusmriti 2.10

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna censures those persons who act without regard to scriptural directives:

He who, having cast aside the commandments of the scriptures, acts under the impulse of desire, attains neither spiritual powers, nor happiness, nor the Supreme Goal. Gita 16.23

Therefore, let the scriptures be your authority, in determining what should be

done and what should not be done. You should perform your actions in this life only after knowing what is said in the commandments of the scripture. Gita 16.24

When we read our scriptures, we learn how we can live a virtuous life and why doing evil does not benefit us in the long run.

Provide Supra-sensuous Answers to difficult Questions about Life and Universe

Hindu Dharma seeks to address core questions related to our being – Who are we? What are we here for? Where do we go? What happens when we die? And so on. The answers to these questions are supra-sensuous, and cannot be determined through logical reasoning, or scientific experimentation. Hindus believe that our Holy books contain the wisdom of spiritually enlightened Rishis, Saints and Sages who had realized and understood

these supra-sensuous or paranormal truths and therefore a study of these scriptures can help us answer our fundamental questions and doubts. In fact, Hindu schools of philosophy maintain that scriptures are the only perfect means of finding the true nature of Dharma and God because their true nature cannot be ascertained beyond doubt through other means such as perception by senses, or by logical inferences.

The Vedas are the eternal eye of the ancestors, devas and humans. Vedic teaching is beyond perception by senses and beyond logic – this is the established rule.

Manusmriti 12.94. Sense perception results when a person's senses come into contact with an object that is present and can be perceived. But perception cannot be a means for knowing eternal Dharma because it is not a material object that can be perceived. On the contrary, the Vedas are an

independent and infallible means of knowing imperceptible Dharma, and the relationship between the letters and meaning of Vedas is eternal – so says **Bādarāyaṇa. Jaimini's Pūrva Mimāmsā Sūtras 1.1.4-5**

Brahman (Supreme Being) is not known from perception by senses or by logical inferences because he can be understood only through scriptures. Vedānta Sūtra 1.1.3

Collected Wisdom of Several Millennia

We can all eventually learn the principles of Physics, Chemistry etc. on our own if we spend ages trying to observe things first hand without the benefit of using any texts on these subjects or study under any teacher. But no one wastes time and energy in learning first hand through endless experimentation when one can conveniently learn from reliable books. Likewise, Hindus should consult and study the scriptures that

contain collected wisdom on Dharma and Moksha instead of trying to figure it out again, and re-invent the wheel.

Substitute for other Dharmic Practices

Certain acts of Dharma such as charity, construction of temples, rituals and so on require wealth. So what should a poor person do? Hindu scriptures state that a person who is unable of performing rituals should still not abandon practices such as study and recitation of the Vedas.

Even if a Brahmana stops performing Vedic rituals, he should nevertheless exert to study the Vedas, acquire spiritual wisdom and control his senses. **Manusmriti 12.92**

Save us from Sins

Reflection upon and recitation of specific hymns from holy books helps us in reducing the burdens of our sins.

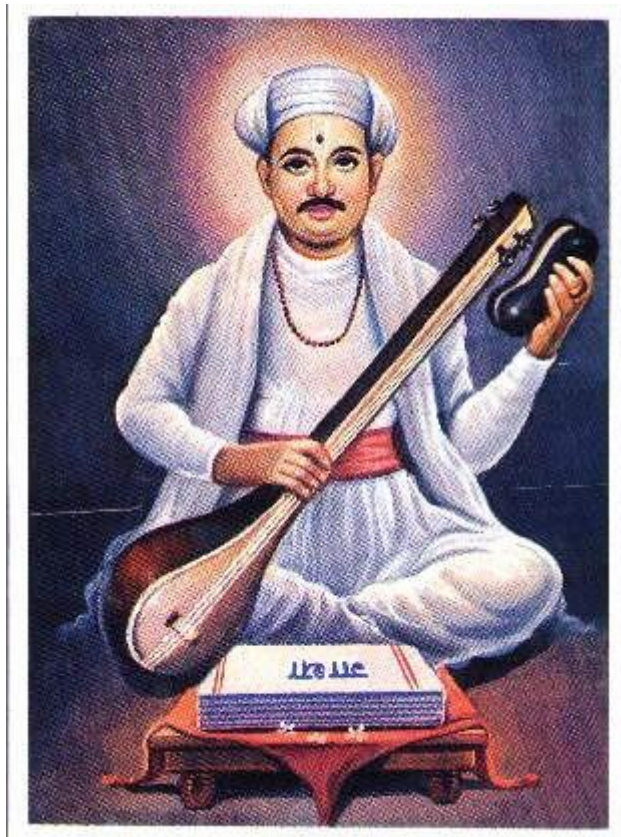
Regular study and recitation of scriptures, performance of the five great daily duties and forgiving others – these save a person from the greatest sins. **Manusmriti 11.245**

By studying the Rigveda, Yajurveda and Sāmaveda together with their Brāhmaṇas and Upanishads three times with a focused mind, one becomes free from all sins.

Manusmriti 11.262

Good deeds do not necessarily cancel the results (or fruit) of bad deeds, and therefore, one must reap their fruits independently. However, there are a few good deeds that are exceptions and can cancel the results of bad deeds. Scriptural study is one of these exceptional good deeds.

Story: Ekanath's son-in-law overcomes his bad habits with the help of Bhagavad Gita



Sant Eknath was a renowned saint of Maharashtra. He married his daughter to a famous scholar (Pandit) of the region. Unfortunately, this scholar fell into bad company. He started going out of his home late in the night, leaving his wife alone. Eknath's daughter became very worried about her husband's behavior and she spoke to her father about it.

Eknath then called his son in law and said, “Look here my son in law. You are a learned man, but my daughter is not. Do her a favor. Before you leave your home every night, please read to her a verse or two of the Bhagavad Gita. This will benefit her greatly. Then, you can go out wherever you please.” The Pandit agreed. So every night before he stepped out, he would read a couple of verses of the Bhagavad Gita to his wife, and explain the meaning to her. Slowly and slowly, the Pandit realized how beautiful the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita were. They started having an influence on how own mind. After some time, with the effect of the Gita, the Pandit stopped going out at the night. He had not intended to study the Gita for his own benefit. But nevertheless, the study of the holy book for the sake of his wife impacted him too in a positive way, and he became a virtuous man.

A traditional story is narrated from the times of the virtuous and scholarly king Raja Bhoja, who ruled central India in the 11th century CE. In his kingdom, there lived a virtuous Brahmana who was very learned in Hindu scriptures, but was very poor. The Brahmana was too proud to beg for food. But one day, he was so overcome by the hardships of poverty that he decided to rob Raja Bhoja's palace.

He somehow entered the palace on a dark night, and reached the chamber in which the King was sleeping with his queen. Expensive jewels, gold jewelry and other costly items were scattered all across the room. The Brahmana could have stolen some of them, but just at that moment, he recalled the teachings of scriptures that one must not steal. Heeding the teaching, he refrained from the evil act. But now, he was realized that the sun was rising on the

horizon and darkness was vanishing rapidly. There was no way he could free from the palace in daylight. Scared, he quickly hid under the bed of the King.

Soon thereafter royal attendants arrived to awaken the King and the Queen with song and music. The King got out of the bed in a good mood, and said three quarters of a verse that praised the joys and pleasures of his life.

When the Brahmana heard these words, he could not restrain himself and uttered the fourth quarter of the verse, “But none of these remain when the eyes are shut.”

Startled the King bent down and saw him. His guards rushed to arrest the Brahmana. The King asked him the reason for his hiding. The Brahmana narrated how he wanted to rob the palace but that he recalled the words of shāstras at that very moment

and therefore stopped himself. The King was pleased to hear the truthful Brahmana and said, “Since you have practiced the teachings of our scriptures, I will not let you go away empty handed. You certainly seem to be a scholar because you completed my verse. And I value scholarship and give gifts to poets in my kingdom.” Saying this, Raja Bhoja ordered that the Brahmana be sent away with costly presents.[2]

Help us in knowing the truth about our multiple Lives

Hindus also believe that an intensive study of scriptures assists in recollection of our past lives. And when we learn about our former existences in different forms, we get less attached to this material world, and become inclined towards the path of spirituality, eventually resulting in Moksha.

Through constant study of the Vedas,

austerities, purity (of mind and body) and absence of any hatred towards other creatures, a person comes to recollect his former lives. Recollecting one's previous lives, such a person then becomes devoted to Brahman, and as a result, he attains the blissful state of Moksha. Manusmriti 4.148-149

When we remember our previous lives, we see the futility and the triviality of our current life in the larger scheme of things. And therefore, we start getting drawn towards the more real, and permanent entities, such as our soul, which survives multiple bodies; and God, who transcends the entire creation in space and time.

Provide a Starting Point for one's Spiritual Journey

Reading scriptures is one of the means by which we can purify our bodies and minds,

and make it a fit receptacle for spiritual enlightenment.

Practice of Tapas (austerity and forbearance), svādhyāya and Ishvara-prāṇidhāna (resigning oneself to God's will, and offering him the fruits of all of one's actions) are recommended as a starting point for those who desire to progress along the path of Yoga, but whose mind is unsteady.... svādhyāya means recitation of 'Om' and other sacred purifying scriptural statements, and study of spiritual scriptures. Patanjali's Yogasūtra 2.1 and Vyāsa's commentary on it (paraphrased)

Through recitation of scriptures, performance of religious vows (vrata), performance of homa (daily Vedic ritual), study of the Vedas, daily offerings, birth of children, five great daily sacrifices and Vedic sacrifices, one's body becomes

Divine and holy. **Manusmriti 2.28**

Practice of Dharma does not necessarily have to involve grand and great deeds. One can do great deeds in a small way every day, and this is the basis of the performance of the five great daily sacrifices. Studying a portion of the scriptures every day is one of these five great daily sacrifices.

Assist Practice of Spiritual Disciplines such as Yoga

Study of scriptures has a synergistic relationship with the practice of Yoga and aids in attainment of Moksha-

The mind of the Yogi who constantly repeats ‘Om’, and reflects on its meaning and significance simultaneously becomes very focused and attentive. And so it has been said- “Let the Yoga be practiced through svādhyāya and let svādhyāya be

facilitated through the practice of Yoga. By practicing Yoga and svādhyāya together, the Supreme Ātman (God) shines (in the heart of the Yogi).”Vyāsa’s commentary on Patanjali’s Yogasūtra 1.28

Rishis, Brahmanas and householders can enhance their wisdom and austerity, as well as purify their body by studying the Vedas and the Upanishads. Manusmriti 6.30

Study of the Vedas, austerity, spiritual enlightenment, control over one’s senses, service towards one’s Guru and Ahimsa, these six lead to the greatest good (Moksha). Manusmriti 12.83

Result in Spiritual Visions, help in Divine Interventions

Study of Scriptures is indeed known to be productive of good results. It gives one the

peace of mind, and leads to a direct vision of the Devas.

The Devas, Rishis and Siddhas (spiritual masters) become visible to who is given to svādhyāya, and they assist him in his tasks.

Vyāsa's commentary on Patanjali's
Yogasūtra 2.44

Therefore, a regular study of scriptures accelerates our spiritual growth.

Beneficial effect on Minds and Body

The very act of recitation of Vedic scriptures is said to have a beneficial effect on our minds due to the combination of the sounds involved, and their soothing teachings.

Study of scriptures gives peace to one's mind and directs us towards the path of virtue and happiness.

He who studies all the Vedas is freed of all

sorrows before long. He who practices purifying Dharma is worshipped in Heaven. Brihaspati Smriti 79

Therefore, in times of great sorrow (such as the death of a family member); it is a common Hindu practice to organize a public recitation and sermon of Hindu scriptures.

Means for Worshipping Rishis and Repaying our Debt to them

Hindu scriptures are a sacred inheritance of all human beings. They are the wisdom of the Rishis and have been passed on from generation to generation to our present times by a devoted and continuous string of teachers and students. Therefore it is our duty to continue the tradition of their study and teaching. Many saints and sages have recommended the study of scriptures and Hindus should feel obliged to follow their advice.

Hindu scriptures say that we are all born with a triple debt – the debt towards Devas, debt towards the Rishis and debt towards our elders. The debt towards Rishis is repaid only by reading the scriptures. Therefore, Hindu scriptures state that study and recitation of Vedas is a form of worshipping the Rishis themselves.

Do not neglect the study and teaching of scriptures. Taittiriya Upanishad 1.11.1

And for in as much as a person is bound to study the Veda, for that reason he is born with a debt owed to the Rishis. Therefore, he studies the Vedas to repay that debt, and one who has studies the Vedas is called the guardian of the treasure of Rishis. Shukla Yajurveda's Mādhyandina Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa 1.7.2.3

Rishis are worshipped through svādhyāya. Manusmriti 3.81

Pleasing to the Lord

Hindu scriptures also state that recitation of the Vedas and other scriptures are pleasing to Lord Vishnu and other Deities, due to which their devotees should do the same regularly.



Story: Ravana chants the Samaveda to get his Freedom

When the arrogant Ravana tried to uproot and lift Mount Kailash (the abode of Shiva) in his hands, Shiva taught him a lesson by pressing the mountain with a toe and crushing Ravana below it. Ravana was trapped, and was not able to extricate himself out of the mountain. The Rishis advised him to chant the Samaveda, as Bhagavān Shiva loved to hear its chanting.

Ravana followed their advice and started chanting Mantras from the Samaveda. Soon, Shiva was pleased and He released Ravana from the mountain. Shiva also granted him a boon.

Teaching of Scriptures to Others earns
Religious Merit

We should study our scriptures so that we can teach them to others. Teaching scriptures to others is an act of charity or

gift, and in fact this gift is more exalted than many other forms of charity:

The gift of Vedic learning is the best of all gifts because the Vedas are the repository of all Dharma. The donor of Vedas dwells in Brahmaloaka (the Supreme Abode) forever.
Yājñavalkya Smṛiti 1.212

Non Religious Reasons for Studying Hindu Scriptures

It is fruitful to study Hindu scriptures for several other reasons:

The doctrines and logic of Pūrva Mimāṃsā related scriptures are the basis of the Hindu personal law in India. Likewise, a study of the Nyāya Sūtras and other associated scriptures is beneficial for acquiring skills of logic and debating.

Hindu scriptures are amongst the oldest surviving and living religions traditions in

the world. As such, a study of these texts is essential for understanding our past, and the development of religious ideas of the entire humanity as a whole.

Hindu scriptures can also be studied to gain insights into historical linguistics, history, and ancient mathematics, music, grammar etc.

Several Hindu scriptures are a delight to study from the perspective of appreciating good poetry.

There is an astonishing amount of information on medicine, statecraft etc., in Hindu scriptures and scholars are still unraveling bits of this knowledge.

John Hanning Speke, who discovered the source of the Nile river in Lake Victoria in 1862 CE, wrote “The Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile” a year

later. In his Journal, the British explorer claims that he discovered the location of the source of the river in descriptions of the region in the Skanda Purāṇa, a Hindu scripture!

References

- [1] Swami Nikhileshwarananda (2015), pp. 17-18
- [2] Chaitanya and Chakra, pp. 662-663

Chapter – 3

Scriptures and Dharma- Their Relative Importance

With all the benefits of studying scriptures, it must be clarified that even the study and recitation of scriptures is no substitute for good conduct and pious living. One cannot wash his hands off goodness and perform evil actions thinking that his scriptural learning will save him.

The Vedas cannot help a man who does not have a virtuous conduct, even though he may have studied them together with the six Vedāngas. At the time of his death, the Vedas abandon such a man,

just as birdlings fly out of their nest when they become adults.

Indeed, all the Vedas together with the Vedāngas and the Yajnas, can bring no joy to a man devoid of good conduct, just as a blind husband derives no joy on seeing his beautiful wife. ***Vasishtha Smriti 6.3-4***

A Brahmana whose conduct is evil does not reap the fruit of Vedic study.

Conversely, a Brahmana who shows appropriate conduct reaps the entire fruit of his Vedic study. ***Manusmriti 1.109***

Study of scriptures is only one of the virtues of acts of Dharma. Dharma is much more than studying scriptures. They who are masters of scriptural learning but are evil in their conduct have

merely wasted their time in studying the holy books. Therefore, scriptures are a means to knowing the difference between Dharma and Adharma, and not a substitute for practicing Dharma.

Scriptures and Moksha (The Final Goal) – Their Relative Importance

Hinduism also does not consider study of scriptures as the final goal. Unlike Abrahamic faiths, Hindus are not strictly a ‘book-religion’. Although long revelatory and other sacred texts exist in hundreds (‘Mahabharata’ in 100,000 verses is the longest poem in the world), they are merely considered as a guide to experience and realize the Supreme Reality, which is beyond all books and intellectual enterprise.

What good can the Vedas do unto him who does not know that Great Being, who is All-pervading and Eternal, Holiest of all, Who sustains the Sun and the Earth, and is the support of the learned, the method of Whose realization is the chief aim of Vedic teaching? But they alone enjoy eternal bliss who study the Vedas, live a righteous life, become perfect Yogis and realize God. Rigveda 1.164.39.

The purport of all Scriptures is Brahman (Supreme Being) indeed, and this is known when their passages are considered harmoniously. Vedānta Sūtra 1.1.4

After studying the scriptures, the wise person who is solely intent on acquiring spiritual knowledge and realization,

should discard the scriptures together,
just as a man who seeks to abandon rice
discards the husk. Amritabindu
Upanishad 18

As is the use of a pond in a place flooded
with water, so is that of all Vedas for a
Brahmana who is enlightened spiritually.
Gita 2.46

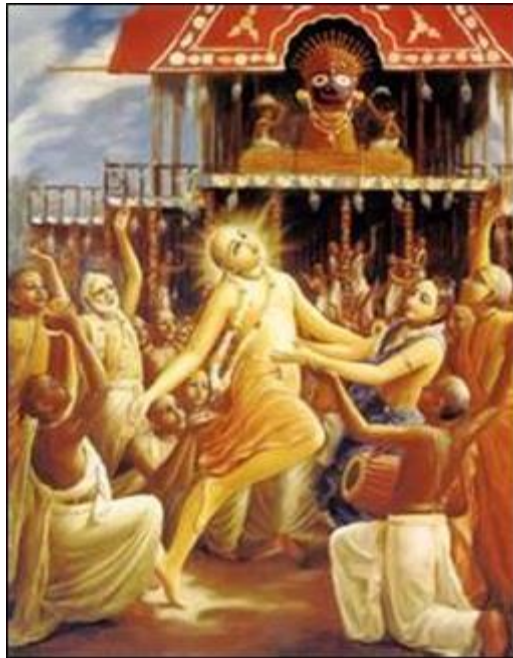
The mere study of the letter of the
scriptures does not have much benefit.
One should first study the scriptures, try
to understand their essence and finally
practice the same to achieve the final
goal of their teaching – spiritual
realization. Moksha is the final goal of
our life, and therefore also the final goal
of scriptural study. If scriptural learning
does not advance one's understanding of
God and lead us closer to Moksha, then it

is of no use. And when the goal is achieved, the scriptures have no value left because the means of reaching the goal are of no further use once the goal itself is reached.

How to and How not to Study the Scriptures

As state above, a study of scriptures and following their teachings is a prerequisite to advancing in Dharma and Moksha. However, many people study the scriptures with the wrong intentions, or they believe that they are very Dharmic and are entitled to Moksha just because they have mastered the scriptures. The following parables from the Hindu tradition teach the correct and the wrong ways of studying the holy books.

1. Live the Scriptures, do not just memorize their Words



Studying the scripture is not an end in itself. Once, a man came to Swami Chinmayananda and said, “I have gone through the Gita fifteen times.” Swami-ji asked, “But has the Gita gone through you even once?” The story below illustrates this message very aptly-

“While touring South India, Chaitanya encountered a certain Brahmin in the

temple of Ranga-kshetra. This man daily sat in the temple turning over the pages of the Bhagavad-gita, but his constant mispronunciation of the Sanskrit made him the object of general mirth and derision. Chaitanya, however, observed signs of genuine spiritual ecstasy on the Brahmin's body, and he asked him what he read in the Gita to induce such ecstasy. The Brahmin replied that he didn't read anything. He was illiterate and could not understand Sanskrit. Nevertheless, his guru had ordered him to read the Gita daily, and he complied as best he could. He simply pictured Krishna and Arjuna together on the chariot, and this image of Krishna's merciful dealings with his devotee caused this ecstasy. Chaitanya embraced the Brahmin and declared that he was an

“authority on reading the Bhagavad-gita.”[1]

2. Do not study scriptures to show-off, but for self-transformation

The story of Vāmana Pandit below shows how mere learning of Gita and other scriptures does not benefit us spiritually. We become ‘alive’ only when we give up our ego and pride, when our heart is filled with devotion, and when we are able to teach the scriptures to the common man in a simple language out of love and compassion.



“Vāmana pandit was born in a Brahmin family of Bijapur, which was under Muslim rule. Even as a young boy he could compose Sanskrit verses. When the ruler Adil Shah heard of this child prodigy, he offered to support the boy, if he embraced Islam, so the family sent him secretly to Varanasi to study under some scholars. After studying there for about twenty years, Vāmana became quite famous for his knowledge and skill

at debating. He used to go on tours and challenge other pandits to a debate. Hearing of Ramadasa, he decided to visit him and challenge him also to a debate. When he arrived near the place where Rāmadāsa was staying, Vāmana pandit sent a messenger to get Rāmadāsa. Vāmana waited and waited under a tree, but by midnight Rāmadāsa had still not come. At that time, he happened to see two ghosts, and overheard them talking about him. The ghosts were saying that Vāmana would soon be joining them. Vāmana pandit became very afraid. He thought about what the ghosts had said and gradually understood that his egotism and pride of scholarship was leading him to hell. In fact, he became so repentant that he decided he would

approach Rāmadāsa for spiritual instructions.

Soon after, at dawn, Rāmadasa arrived and Vāmana pandit bowed down at his feet. Rāmadasa blessed the pandit and after giving him some spiritual instructions, told him to go to Badarika Ashrama, in the Himalayas, and meditate on Vishnu. After practicing sadhana whole-heartedly there for a long time, Vāmana pandit had a vision of the Lord, who blessed him and told him to go back to Rāmadāsa for further instructions. When Vamana pandit met Rāmadāsa again, Rāmadāsa gave him more instructions and told him to go to Shri Shaila Hill to meditate on Shiva. Again Vāmana did as he was told, practicing intense sādhanā for several years. Here

also he was blessed by the Lord and told to return to Rāmadāsa. This time (in 1668 CE) Rāmadāsa described to the pandit how the common man needed religious education in their own language. Thus far the pundit had written only in Sanskrit. His learning was learning only among other Brahmin pundits like himself. It was of no use to ordinary people. So Rāmadāsa requested Vāmana pandit to write religious books in Marathi for the common people, and Vāmana agreed. Besides some very beautiful poems, Vāmana pundit also wrote a Marathi commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita, entitled Yathārtha Dīpikā.”[2]

3. There are no Short-Cuts to Studying the Scriptures, it takes Hard Work



Sage Bharadvāja and his son Yavakrīta were neighbors of Sage Raibhya and his sons. The latter were all great scholars. Many people travelled long distances to study under Raibhya and his children. This made Yavakrīta jealous. But he did not like to study. So, he started praying to Lord Indra. Pleased with Yavakrīta's

penance, Lord Indra appeared in front of him and offered him a boon. Yavakrīta asked that he become a great scholar, so that people should come to study under him, just as they went to study under Raibhya and his scholarly sons.

But Indra replied, “If you want to become knowledgeable, you should focus on your studies, rather than trying to please me and get the boon of wisdom from me.”

But Yavakrīta would not listen. He resumed his austerities and penance, hoping that Indra would eventually get impressed and bless him with knowledge. One day, Yavakrīta went to the River Ganga to take a bath, when he noticed an old man throwing handfuls of sand into the river current. When

Yavakrīta asked him the reason for doing so, the old man said, “People have a difficulty crossing the river. Therefore, I am constructing a bridge across it by throwing sand into the water.”

Yavakrīta was amused, and said, “But you cannot construct a bridge this way because the water will keep washing away the sand that you throw. Instead, you need to work harder and put in more effort and materials to construct the bridge.” The old man replied, “If you can become a scholar without studying, I too can construct a bridge with just handfuls of sand.”

Yavakrīta realized that it was Lord Indra who came disguised as the old man to teach him that worship alone cannot result in scholarship. He therefore

apologized to Lord Indra and started studying diligently.

4. Scriptural Learning is not a Substitute for Practical Wisdom & Wisdom



Once several men were crossing the Ganges in a boat. One of them, a Pandit, was making a great display of his erudition, saying that he had studied various books – the Vedas, the Vedanta, and the six systems of philosophy. He

asked a fellow passenger, “Do you know the Vedanta?” “No, revered sir.” “The Samkhya and the Patanjala?” “No, revered sir.” “Have you read no philosophy whatsoever?” “No, revered sir.” The pandit was talking in this vain way and the passenger was sitting in silence when a great storm arose and the boat was about to sink. The passenger said to the pandit, “Sir, can you swim?” “No”, replied the pandit. The passenger said, “I don’t know Samkhya or the Patanjala, but I can swim.”

What will a man gain by knowing many scriptures? That one thing needful is to know how to cross the river of the word. God alone is real, and all else is illusory.”[3]

5. **Scriptural learning is not a substitute for common-sense**

A Sanskrit proverb reads – “Just as a blind man has no use for a mirror, what will he do with scriptural knowledge if he lacks common-sense?” The following story from the Panchatantra illustrates the truth that in addition to mastering the Holy Scriptures, one must also have commonsense.

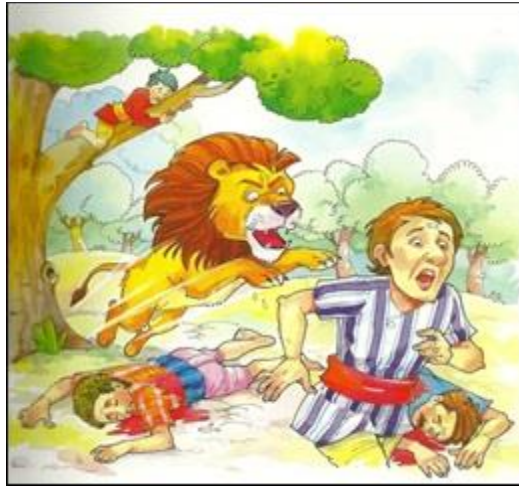


The Four Pandits and the Lion: There were four childhood friends. Three of them studied a lot in different schools

and became very learned scholars. The fourth was not that learned, but he had a lot of wisdom and commonsense. One day, the three scholars met with each other and said, “What is the use of our knowledge if we are not able to make any money out of it? Let us go to the royal palace and get a job with the King. This will make us rich.” The first scholar said, “The fourth among us is not really a scholar. What is the use of taking him with us? Let us leave him behind.’

But the third of them was a kind hearted person. He said, “We have been friends since our childhood. Therefore, it is not fair to leave him behind.” So all the four got together and started walking towards the palace. On the way, there was a jungle. There, they saw a pile of bones

lying on the ground. They immediately recognized that these bones belonged to a dead lion.



The first scholar said, “I know how to put these bones together and complete the skeleton of the lion.” He used his knowledge, and within a few minutes, the skeleton was ready.

The second scholar said, “I know how to put blood, skin and muscles into the skeleton.” He too worked for some time, and soon, the skeleton had muscles, eyes, blood and skin on it.

The third scholar said, “I can give life to this animal and make it alive!” Everyone seemed impressed. But, the fourth friend, who was not very scholarly, immediately stopped them and said, “Do not be foolish. A lion eats human beings. If you make it alive, it will pounce on us and eat us.” But the three did not listen to him. However, he begged them to allow him to climb a tree before they make him alive. They agreed.

When the lion came alive, it immediately pounced on the three scholarly friends and killed them. The fourth friend on the tree looked at the dead bodies of his friends and wept. He waited for the lion to go away, and then got off the tree and went back to his village. He said, “I wish

that my scholarly friends also had some common-sense.”

Scriptural learning is useless if it does not make you a better Human Being

Once, a gathering of Rishis took place at Mt Kailash, where Bhagavan Shiva lives. Rishi Durvasa too walked in with a bundle of books in his hand. But he did not greet any of the other Rishis present, and went up to Bhagavan Shiva’s throne, sitting right next to him. Bhagavan Shiva asked him, “Rishi, how is your study progressing?” With pride on his face, Rishi Durvasa replied, “I have studied all the books that I am carrying and have learned them by heart.”

Rishi Narada got up and then said, “Pardon me Rishi Durvasa, but you are

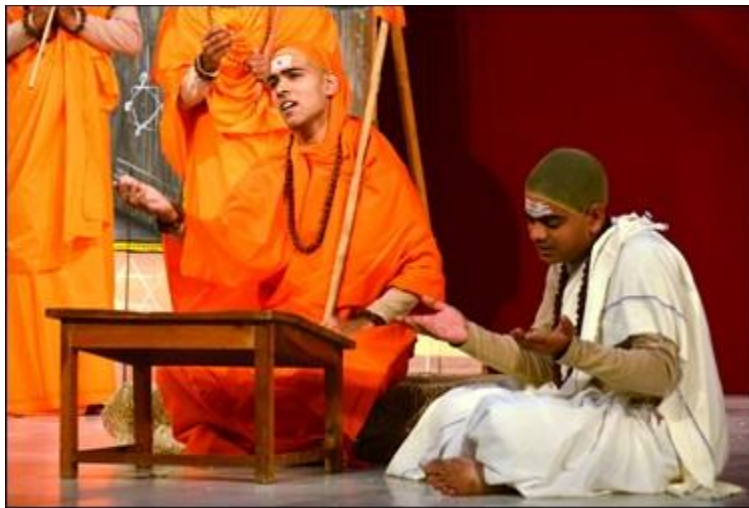
just carrying these books like a donkey that carries burden on its back.” When Rishi Durvasa heard these words, he became red with anger, and threatened Rishi Narada, “How dare you ridicule me? I will curse you. Why did you compare me to a donkey?”

Rishi Narada replied, “True knowledge gives humility, forgiveness and good manners. You walked in without greeting others, and sat right next to Bhagavan, instead of sitting at His feet. Does this not show that you have not learned anything even after memorizing your books?”

Rishi Durvasa realized that Rishi Narada was saying the truth. He realized that his behavior had been foolish. In repentance, he discarded his books in the ocean, and

left the assembly to do meditation to atone for his inappropriate behavior.

7. At the Time of Death, it is not Scriptural learning, but Bhakti that will save you



Once, Shri Shankaracharya was walking along the banks of the Ganga River in Varanasi with his disciples. He saw a very old Pandit, almost on his death bed, trying to master and teach the rules of Sanskrit grammar. Out of compassion, the Acharya composed a stotra of 13

verses, in which he asks humans to seek refuge in Krishna because only He can save us at the time of death. Learning rules of grammar for mere intellectual satisfaction will not save us from death.

The 14 disciples of Shankaracharya added a verse each, and collectively, it became a Stotra of 27 verses. This beautiful stotra is called Bhaja Govindam, or Moha Mudgara (a Hammer to shatter delusion).

The stotra teaches the worthlessness of worldly desires and ego and asks us to seek refuge in Bhagavān by chanting His names, reading the Gita, and becoming dispassionate towards worldly pleasures.

References

[1] Rosen, Steven. 1988. The Life and Times of Lord Chaitanya. Folk Books: Brooklyn (New York). pp. 163-164

[2] Parivrajika, pp. 199-200

[3] Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna Math. Mylapore: Madras, pp. 58-59

Chapter 4

Why do Hindus have so many Scriptures?

Most religions have one holy book. The Sikhs have the Adi Granth, Christians have the Bible (which is a collection of 66 books plus a few more in the Catholic version), Muslims have the Koran and Jews have the Torah. But Hindus, Buddhists and Jains seem to have an abundance of scriptures – literally hundreds of them. Why don't Hindus have just one Holy Book?

Story: Rishi Bharadvaja realizes that there is no end to studying Scriptures



A beautiful story in the Yajurveda (Taittiriya Brahmana 3.10.11) narrates the infinite extent of the Vedas themselves. Some Rishis in the Hindu tradition are said to have lived a very long life. One of them was Rishi Bharadvaja. A beautiful story is narrated on his love for the study of the Vedas. He spent his extra-ordinary long life of 300 years studying the Vedas. Pleased with his devotion to the scriptures, Indra appeared before the Rishi and asked: “If I were to increase your life by another 300 years, what would you want to do?”

The Rishi replied, “I would spend the next 100 years again in studying the Vedas.”

Indra then created three mountains of sand in front of the Rishi, and said, “These three mountains represent Rik, Yajus and Samans, the three types of Vedic mantras. And from each mountain, your study is but a fistful of sand because endless are the Vedas (anantā vai vedāh).”

Rishi Bharadvaja was amazed, and asked Indra to show him the true path. Indra recommended him to worship the Divine in the form of the Sun through a special religious ceremony. He said that worshipping Bhagavān was equivalent in merit to mastering the three mountains of sand worth Vedic knowledge.

Rishi Bharadvaja followed Indra’s advice, and attained Moksha. He realized that there is no end to studying the scriptures. At a

certain point, we should focus more on applying their teachings.

There are many answers to the question why we Hindus have thousands of scriptures:

There is a lot of wisdom in Hindu Dharma, and this requires many books. Hindus have been blessed with a continuous string of saints and sages for several thousands of years. These great men and their disciples have collected their teachings resulting in a vast number of sacred writings. It is similar to the fact that the entire knowledge of Physics cannot be captured within a single book these days. So also, the entire wisdom of Hindus cannot be incorporated in just one holy book.

Hindu Dharma is the most ancient faith in the world. It is expected then that it has had the longest period of time to churn out more holy writings than others. This is another

obvious reason why Hindus have so many scriptures.

The core scriptures of other religions originated in a very small area whereas the core scriptures of Hindus were compiled in a much larger region, resulting in Hindus having a lot more holy writings than many other faiths. To get a perspective, most Hindu writings originated in different parts of the Indian subcontinent, a region that is dozens of times larger than Israel (where the Jewish and Christian writings arose) or Hijaz (where the Koran originated). This too has resulted in the large number of Hindu scriptures.

Hindu Dharma recognizes a diversity of beliefs, doctrines and practices. It is not a 'one size fits all' or a 'my way or the highway religion'. To reach these diverse perspectives, Hindus have multiple books.

This explains why Hindus have multiple schools of philosophy, each with their own set of scriptures.

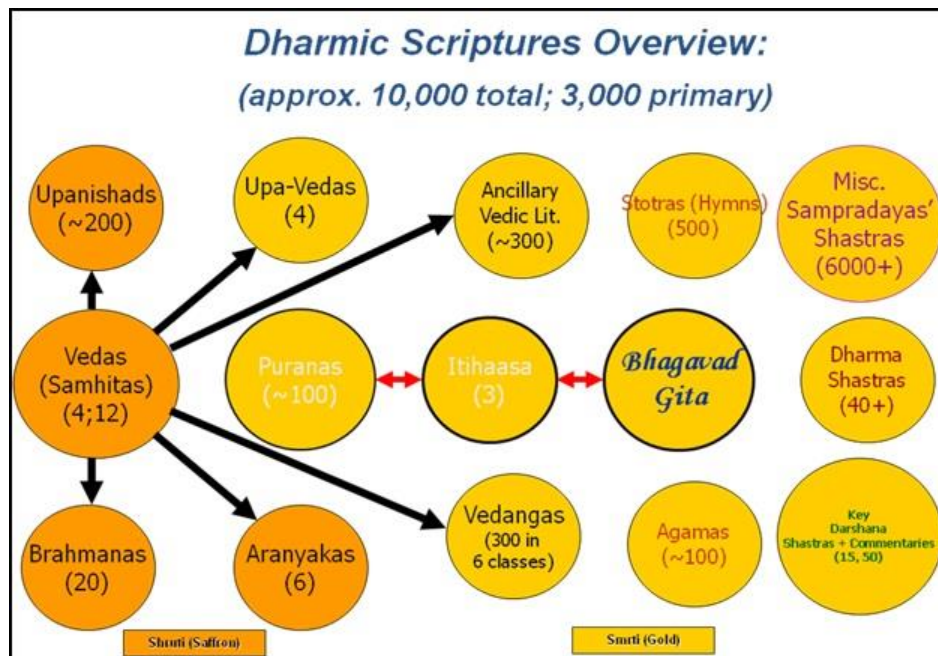
Hinduism also permits the worship of God in many different forms and also as a Formless Supreme Being. Many different scriptures contain instructions on the proper procedure for worshipping these different forms of the Divine. For example, the Vaishnava Pancharatra texts have details on worshipping Lord Vishnu, whereas the Shaiva Agamas contain instructions on worshipping Lord Shiva. The multiplicity of worship amongst Hindus has also contributed to the diversity of Hindu scriptures.

Hindus recognize the fact different people are at different levels of mental capacity, spiritual attainment and temperaments. To cater to people of different calibers, Hindus

have different scriptures. For example, the Purāṇas are more user-friendly and are geared **towards** Hindus who might not have the competence or temperament to study the more difficult Vedas. This is just like the fact that students use different textbooks for the same subject (say, Chemistry) in different grades in their schools.

Hindus also tend to have different scriptures to discuss different topics instead of lumping all topics and branches of learning into a single book. For example, just as students have different textbooks for Physics, Chemistry and Biology, Hindus too have different scriptures to explain to them the principles of ritual, devotion, wisdom and so on in separate books. If the wisdom of Hindus were not great in extent, it would have been possible to combine all these different writings into one collection. But individual Hindu scriptures can also tend to

be very vast. E.g., the Vedic literature is six times the length of the Bible.



Hindus do not have a central authority that regulates what is scripture and what is an ordinary writing. In other religions such as Islam and Christianity, there too existed many versions of scripture in the past, but central councils of scholars met to stamp out diversity of holy writings and mandated only one particular version of their scripture as authorized or acceptable. For example the

Council of Nicea in 325 CE suppressed several alternate versions of the Bible and approved only one that is similar to the version available these days. Similarly, the second Islamic Caliph Othman ordered destruction of several divergent versions of the Koran and allowed only one to circulate. In contrast, Hindus accept diversity and the original four Vedas developed into hundreds of different branches that differ slightly from each other. Hindus consider all these versions as authoritative because of the realization that all these branches teach the same principles, even though in a slightly different language. Hindus explain the multiplicity of our scriptures through the dictum that “The Truth is One, but the wise teach it in many different ways” (Rigveda 1.164.46).

Hindu Dharma is not tied to a particular period of time, or to a particular founder of

the Hindu religion, or to a last Prophet or the only son of God. Hindus believe that although the Vedas are held to be the gold standard because they were intuited by spiritually realized Rishis, there are many other writings that contain the teachings of Saints, Sages and scholars who were also divinely inspired. Hindus believe that at any given point of time in history, it is possible for a spiritual person to attain great heights of realization which the Vedas talk about, and the writings of such great men then assume the form of scripture, because they reflect the spirit of the Vedas and other holy books.

Hinduism relies a lot on personal teaching by a Guru. Much of Hindu scriptures have been passed on from generation to generation through the medium of instruction from Guru to his disciples. Several Gurus have added their own

commentaries and explanations to the scriptures to explain their meaning more effectively. Or they have compiled their own versions of the scripture to cater to the needs of their own disciples better. This has lead to several versions of the same scripture, and Hindus do not have a problem treating these different versions and commentaries as sacred writings.

Hindus also believe that several scriptures such as the Dhamashastras do not have eternal validity because of changed social conditions. Therefore, new scriptures are codified to apply the Vedic principles so that they suit the new conditions better. For example, it was believed by some Hindus that the Manusmriti was applicable in more ancient times whereas the Parashara Smriti is applicable in the present age according to some Hindus.

In many cases, one holy book of the Hindus has been split into many for the convenience of the readers. For e.g., Hindus believe that the Vedas were one holy book which was split into four Vedas (Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda) for the convenience of students by Veda Vyasa. In contrast, Christians have combined 66 books written by different people and during different times into a single book called the Bible.

The final reason for such a large number of scriptural texts in Hinduism is the fact that Sanskrit, in which the most ancient writings of Hindus were composed, ceased to be a popularly spoken language in the last 2000 years or so. Therefore, Saints who were filled with compassion wrote versions of several popular ancient Sanskrit scriptures in the vernacular languages prevalent amongst Hindus in their region. E.g. the Rāmāyaṇa of

Vālmīki has been rendered into Tamil, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Telugu and numerous other languages by Saint Poets and is widely read with reverence by Hindus today.

Can we Read all these Scriptures? Choosing One Scripture for Studying

Having multiple scriptures can sometimes make the task of reading them daunting for most Hindus. Therefore, there are some scriptures that are believed to contain the main teachings of all the other scriptures. E.g., the Gita is said to be the essence of teachings of spiritual scriptures such as the Upanishads. It is recommended that if one can read only one Hindu scripture, then let it be the Bhagavad Gita. Or Ramayana. Or Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Intellectual minded Hindus also like to read the Upanishads today.

In the chart below, the scriptures that are commonly read by ordinary Hindus are shown in the red font.



Chapter - 5

The Hindu tendency to see all faiths through their own spiritual viewpoint is patronizing and insulting to other faiths, whose followers openly reject the Hindu interpretations of their own doctrines which they have understood in a different manner traditionally.

Hindu Scriptures and the Proverbial Hindu Tolerance: Interfaith Perspectives

Hindu Dharma is not a 'One Book, One Prophet, One God' religion. The very fact that there are thousands of sacred books within our own tradition, and that thousands

are Saints and Sages are associated with revealing and compiling them has made Hindus take it for granted that diversity of scriptures is a fact of nature. The existence of so large a number of scriptures within our own tradition makes it easier for Hindus to accept that religious traditions outside our own also have their own scriptures, and that these non-Hindu scriptures are also worthy of study, respect and reverence.

Hindu Dharma encourages us not just to get a well-rounded knowledge of all our scriptures (or as many as possible), but also study the Holy Books of other religions with respect. A scripture which says that it is itself is 'the only true book' and everything else is not worthy of study and respect is actually the product of the limited spiritual vision and world view of its author. This is why Hindus have not indulged in bouts of burning and destroying books of other

religions. In contrast, the followers of ‘One Book, One Religion, Last/One Prophet, One God’ faiths have frequently burned the scriptures of other religions and continue to cause bloodshed and destruction even in our own times.

Instead of telling us to prove ourselves different from other peoples so that we can set ‘up our own prophetable shop’ for potential customers, Hindu Dharma advises us to look for common spiritual themes or the common essence of all these diverse scriptures. Therefore, instead of seeing these different holy books as disconnected and discrete pieces of knowledge, we should seek their underlying higher teachings. For example, the Upanishad says:

Truth is One, but the realized Poets with spiritual vision describe it in many different

ways. Rigveda 1.164.46

Cows are of different colors but their milk is the same color. Similarly, (the wise person) regards spiritual wisdom as the milk and the many branched Vedas as different cows.
Amritabindu Upanishad 19

Just as the bee extracts the essence from several flowers (to make the nectar like honey), a clever man should also take the essence from all sources and scriptures, whether they are short or long. Bhāgavata Purāṇa 11.8.10

This does not mean however that Hindus should accept any writing considered as sacred by any community as a holy scripture. The rule still remains that the Vedas are the golden standard by which all other scriptures are judged. Unfortunately,

Hindus have carried the spirit of inclusivism and acceptance of diversity to such an extreme that they have ceased to see the genuine differences in the doctrines of different religions, and also fail to see the faults in various religious scriptures.

Likewise, they have also started assuming that the Prophets and Saints of all religions were also spiritually realized souls in the Vedāntic and Yogic mold of Hindu tradition. However, when we actually read the sacred texts of other religions, and study the biographies of prophets and saints, the results are not always flattering. In fact, the Hindu tendency to see all faiths through their own spiritual viewpoint is patronizing and insulting to other faiths, whose followers openly reject the Hindu interpretations of their own doctrines which they have understood in a different manner traditionally. Therefore, instead of

considering scriptures and important figures of all religions as equal, Hindus ought to use ‘viveka’ and try to discriminate between what is false, and what is true.

Classification of Hindu Scriptures

The two major categories in which all Hindu scriptures are divided are the Shruti and the Smriti.

Shruti: The Vedas constitute the Shruti, a word that means ‘that which has been heard (from God) by the Rishis’ and are considered of Divine origin[1]. The principles of Dharma that are taught in the Vedas are called the ‘Vaidika Dharma’ or ‘Shrauta Dharma’ and are considered to be infallible (without error), universal and eternal.

Smriti: The word Smriti word literally means ‘that which is remembered’. Human culture advances when the collected wisdom of the society is passed on from one generation to another (‘societal memory’), and each new generation adds to its inherited wisdom.

Whereas Shruti is considered of Divine origin or inspiration, Smriti is considered the wisdom of Saints and Sages who were pious, virtuous and had understood the Vedas. It is believed that the teachings of Smritis are derived from the Vedas itself. The Hindu tradition says that although the Saintly authors of the Smritis were enlightened souls, yet it is still possible that they had some imperfections. For this reason, the Smriti scriptures have a lower authority than the Shruti scriptures, which are directly revealed by or inspired by the

perfect God. Smritis which openly conflict with the Veda are rejected.

“Smriti or ‘remembering’ is an eminently personal experience. One remembers what one has done or what has happened to one. Through memory one can appropriate and relive one’s past, and learn from experiences. These marks – appropriation, reliving, learning, and guidance – are all included in the sense of smriti. Smriti refers to that store of group experiences by which the community appropriates and relives its past, learns from it and is guided by it, and in the process shapes its identity. In so far as smriti has to do with personal experience, it is humanly authored (paurusheya in contrast to shruti proper, which is apaurusheya or ‘not humanly produced.’ This is a crucial distinction for the ongoing life of a community. The non-personal Veda, received by the seers, which is religiously

sacrosanct, linguistically immutable, culturally perfect.... Needs to be made accessible and humanized. Smriti probes, interrogates, debates, offers answers, mediates. It makes the impersonal personal. It allows the shruti to shape the world in which we live, and so to shape lives. For what may be smriti to you or your community, may not function as smriti for me or my community. Or it may weight this authority differently according to the particular traditions that nurture us, or the demands of our situations. Smriti is the medium through which we hear the voice of the shruti; it is interpretive, selective, collaborative, pliable. Shruti and smriti – or their equivalents, namely the primary scripture and tradition – are the co-ordinates by which the religious authority of Hinduism has been transmitted.

For Hindus, smriti recalls exemplary figures and events that have shaped their past, the universe they inhabit. These figures may be human or non-human, benevolent or hostile, virtuous or malign. Smriti pronounces on the origination and transmission of almost every branch of human expertise. Its concerns include how to use words, how to read the heavens, how to care for elephants, how to make love, how to make war, how to make temples, how to worship, how to go on pilgrimage (and where and why), how to dance, how to sing; how to classify men, women, horses, gems, snakes, herbs, dreams....how to curse and how to heal. Smriti deals with the founding of ancient dynasties and their ending; with the origination and destruction of the world; with rites of passage, the goals and stages of life, and cremation rites.

Smriti prescribes and cautions in all matters of dharma or right living: in the dharma of husbands, in the dharma of wives....of eating, drinking....worshipping, purifying: in a word, in the dharma of living and in the dharma of dying. Smriti is a great storyteller, myth-maker, codifier, teacher, punisher, rewarder, guide.”[2]

“Smriti can support primary scripture directly or indirectly through stories about gods, saints and sacred events, cautionary tales, graphic descriptions of heavenly and hellish realms, didactic discourses, the elaboration of codes of dharma, the sanctioning of reward or punishments for observing or violating these codes, and by recording the development of human expertise in prosody, phonetics, astronomy, love-making, war-waging, temple building, icon-shaping, philosophy and theology and so on. The amount of accumulated material

that counts for smriti over the past 4000 years is immense, and in the more articulate world in which we live this material is increasingly rapidly all the time....”[3]

“....implementing smriti is a subjective exercise. What may be suitably corroborative material for my grasp of primary scripture may not be so for you; or you may use the same material in a different way. For smriti to function as smriti, what matters is the intention seen to underlie the material in question. An item of smriti may not seem to focus on primary scripture at all, e.g. a treatise on erotics, or grammar, or astronomy, but it is regarded as smriti because it is seen as intended to further – or is made by those in appropriate authority to bear upon – the aims of the shruti or primary scripture. For instance, it may do this by enabling an appropriate lifestyle to be

followed, for it is only on this basis that scripture would be efficacious.”[4]

Although the word Smriti may be used in general to denote all the non-Shruti literature, it is often used in a more restricted sense to denote only the Dharmashāstra scriptures. Traditionally, the Dharmashāstras are considered the second only to Shruti in terms of authority. Therefore, they are more authoritative than the Purāṇas, Itihāsas and all the other non-Shruti classes of scriptures.

Āgamas:

There is a class of Hindu scriptures called the Āgamas which are accepted only by the sampradāya or the tradition to which they belong. For e.g., the Vaishnava Āgamas are followed only by worshippers of Vishnu, and the Shaiva Agamas are accepted only by worshippers of Shiva. The Āgamas are also referred to as Tantras, especially those

belong to the Shākta and Shaiva traditions. Sometimes, the followers of these Āgamas consider their own Agama text as at par with Shruti. It is for this reason that Hindu traditions sometimes says that the Shruti is of two types – Vaidika and Tāntrika. However, this view that the Āgamas are of equal authority as the Shruti is not accepted by all Hindus.

Shruti as the Supreme Authority for Hindus:

Practically all Hindus accept the supreme authority of the Shruti literature, with a few exceptions such as the Lingayyata Shaivite Hindus, who consider the Shaiva scriptures as more authoritative. Acceptance of the Vedic authority is often considered a hallmark of being a Hindu. For this reason, Jains and Buddhists are not sometimes considered as Hindus, even though they

share their history, cultural heritage, ethical values etc., with the Hindu community. The case of Sikhs is more complicated, because their own supreme scripture (the Ādi Grantha) seems to accept the Divine origin and authority of the Vedas in matters of Dharma. However, modern Sikhs by and large do not accept the Vedas and do not consider themselves as Hindus.

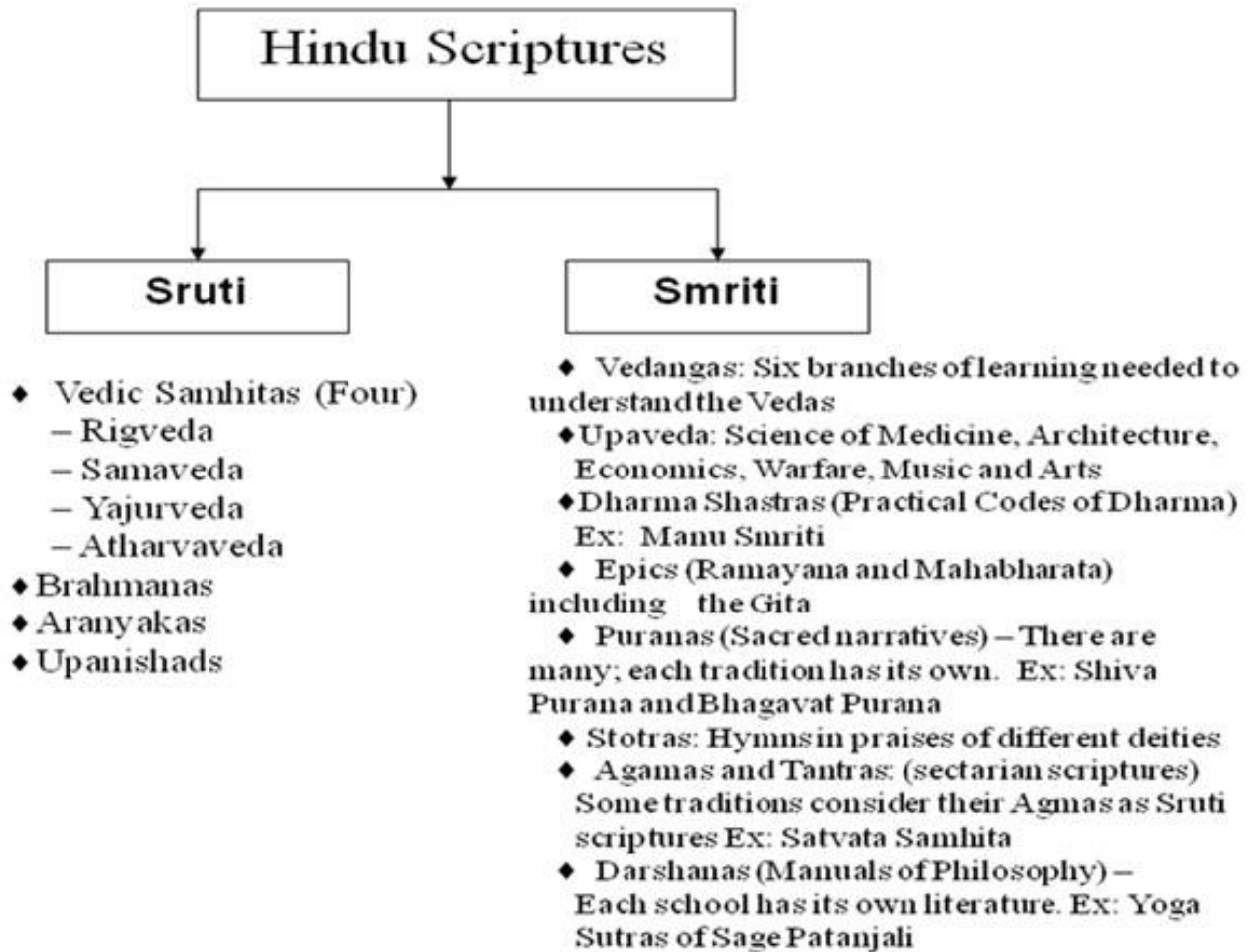
Sometimes, the Agamas and Tantras are considered a second type of Shrutis in addition to the Vedas (Samhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āranyaka and Upanishads). This is because according to some Hindu traditions, the Āgamas and Tantras were also directly revealed by Bhagavān.

Some Hindus also believe that the Bhagavad Gita is Shruti, because Bhagavān in the Form of Krishna revealed it to Arjuna. A

majority of Hindus however believe in the chart displayed above.

Similarly, the school of Indian philosophies (Darshana Shastras) that accept the authority of the Shruti, even if for the sake of formality, are considered as Āstika (or ‘Believer’, ‘orthodox’) Darshanas; whereas those which reject the Shruti are called the Nāstika (heretical) Darshanas. The latter includes the Buddhist, Jain and the Chārvāka/Bāhrsapatya (atheist and materialistic) Darshanas. The former includes the Hindu Darshanas of Sāmkhya, Yoga, Vedānta, Pūrva Mīmāmsā, Nyāya and Vaisheshika Darshanas.

The chart below shows the major categories of Hindu sacred literature.



Notes

[1] The word 'Rishi' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Drish', or 'to see'. In other words, the Shruti is the record of the spiritual vision, or insight into the Divine of the Rishis. The Rishis were pure hearted and spritually advanced individuals who

devoted their entire lives to Dharma and Moksha. Women Rishis are called Rishikas.

[2] Lipner (2010), p. 89

[3] Lipner (2010), p. 90

[4] Lipner (2010), p. 90

Chapter 6

Traditionally, the Vedic literature as such signifies a vast body of sacred and esoteric knowledge concerning eternal spiritual truths revealed to sages (Rishis) during intense meditation. They have been accorded the position of revealed scriptures and are revered in Hindu religious tradition.

The Vedas or Shruti

Importance of the Vedas

As explained above, the Vedas are considered the supreme scriptures, or the gold-standard by most Hindus. The word

‘Veda’ is often derived from 5 Sanskrit roots these days:

- . *Vid jnaane*: To know
- . *Vid sattaayaam*: To be, to endure
- . *Vid labhe*: To obtain
- . *Vid vichaarane*: To consider
- . *Vid chetanaakhyaananiveseshu*: To feel, to tell, to dwell

To these roots is added the suffix ‘*ghaw*’ according to Ashtādhyāyī 3.3.19, the celebrated text of Sanskrit grammar of Panini. Accordingly, the word Veda means ‘the means by which, or in which all persons know, acquire mastery in, deliberate over the various lores or live or subsist upon them.’

Traditionally, the Vedic literature as such signifies a vast body of sacred and

esoteric knowledge concerning eternal spiritual truths revealed to sages (Rishis) during intense meditation. They have been accorded the position of revealed scriptures and are revered in Hindu religious tradition. Over the millennia the Vedas have been handed over generation to generation by oral tradition and hence the name “**shruti**” or “that which is heard”. According to tradition they are un-authored (apaurusheya) and eternal, and are considered the revelation of God to the Rishis. This is the other reason for calling them Shruti.

Theoretically, the Vedic corpus is held in deep reverence in the Hindu society. It constitutes the most authoritative genre of Hindu scriptures. Any other Hindu scripture must agree with the Vedas in

order to be considered an authority. Schools of philosophy which reject the authority of the Vedas are considered ‘*Naastika*’ or heretical, while schools which accept Vedic authority, even if nominally, are considered ‘*Aastika*’ or orthodox, from a Hindu perspective. While most Hindus never see Vedic texts in their lifetime, the term ‘Veda’ is used as a synonym for authoritativeness in religious matters. The Vedas are considered full of all kinds of knowledge, and an infallible guide for man in his quest for the four goals – *Dharma*, *Artha* (material welfare), *Kāma* (pleasure and happiness) and *Moksha* (Salvation). In sacred Hindu literature, they are considered the very manifestation of God, and the ultimate source of all wisdom and of all Dharma.

Hindu priests were exhorted to study them regularly, recite their sentences, practice their sacraments and memorize their words. In practice however, this has been restricted to a dwindling minority of the Brāhmaṇa caste, despite recent attempts to revive Vedic study, ritual and recitation in the traditional manner. On the other hand, the Vedic texts are now widely available in print, and this has lead to a greater dissemination of their knowledge amongst Hindu masses, than say, a century back. Even here however, the popularization largely concerns the spiritual treatises called the Upanishads – the texts par excellence of Hindu spirituality. In fact, for several centuries now, the word ‘Veda’ has been used by Hindu teachers to indicate the Upanishadic texts in particular.

How Were the Vedas Revealed?

According to Hindu tradition, Bhagavān Brahmā created the Universe and then revealed the four Vedas to numerous Rishis at the beginning of this creation. Since then, an unbroken chain of students and teachers have been transmitting the Vedas down to our time. The four faces of Brahmā represent these four Vedas as well as the four directions.



The Vedas are also associated with his consort Devi Sarasvati, who is the Devi of all wisdom and knowledge.

The Vedas however are not the creation or composition of the Brahmā because they are eternal. Bhagavān Brahmā is merely their caretaker of this Divine knowledge, which really belongs to the Supreme Being (Brahman). However, Brahmā also composed some original works, which initiated many other branches of Hindu knowledge – like Ayurveda, Dharmashāstras etc. All these works whose tradition started from the original compositions of Brahmā are called Smritis; whereas the Vedas which were revealed by Brahmā but not authored by him are called Shruti (‘that which are heard from Brahman’).

As time progressed, the capacity of human beings to study scriptures declined.

Sometimes, the Vedas even got lost. Therefore, a Rishi appeared periodically to re-arrange them and even rediscover them. The current version of the four Vedas is said to have been given their present form by Rishi Veda Vyasa, who was the son of Rishi Parāshara, and a fisherwoman named Satyavatī. Veda Vyāsa then taught the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda to his four students: Rishi Paila, Rishi Vaishampāyana, Rishi Jaimini and Rishi Sumantu respectively. They in turn taught them to numerous disciples and so on, leading to slightly differing versions of the four Vedas. These versions are known by the names of the last Rishis after whom no other modifications were made to the texts of the Vedas.

However, another viewpoint is that hundreds of very ancient Rishis (mainly on the banks of the river Sarasvati which dried out by

1500 BCE or even earlier) received the hymns and sections of the four Vedas from Brahman. Brahmā has no role to play in this viewpoint. A big chunk of these revelations were lost with time, and Veda Vyāsa compiled whatever remained, to preserve it for posterity. Even the existing Vedic literature is 6 times the length of the Bible, and is much older!

There is a third, modern viewpoint proposed by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1873 CE). According to this view, the Supreme Being revealed the four Vedas respectively to Rishis Agni (Rigveda), Vāyu (Yajurveda), Āditya (Samaveda) and Angirasa (Atharvaveda).

Several modern scholars have proposed different dates for the Vedas:[\[1\]](#)

- . Tilak 4000 – 2500 BCE
- . Jacobi 4000 BCE

- . Wilson 3500 BCE
- . Hough 2500 – 1400 BCE
- . R C Dutt 2000 – 1400 BCE
- . Roth 1000 BCE
- . Max Mueller 1500 – 1200 BCE

Classification of the Vedic Scriptures

The Vedas are four in number – Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda and Atharvaveda. According to tradition, each Veda can be divided into two parts – Mantras and Brāhmaṇas. A collection of Mantras is typically called a Samhitā, although they can also occur in the Brāhmaṇa texts. Currently, and often in ancient Hindu tradition as well, it is often the Samhita portion alone which is referred to as the Veda. For instance, the word ‘Rigveda’ would typically mean the Rigveda Samhitā. The Ārya Samāj school of Hindus, responsible for the modern revival of Vedic study in northern India, and

founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 CE, in fact rejects the Brāhmaṇas as portions of Vedas. For them, the Vedas include only the four Samhitās – Rigveda Samhitā(Shākala version), Atharvaveda Samhitā (in its Shaunaka version), Yajurveda Samhitā (Mādhyandina version) and the Sāmaveda (Kauthuma version). All other Samhitās and the rest of the Vedic literature is considered by them to be outside the Veda proper.

The Brāhmaṇas have their own names and are more like theological treatises of the Vedas. The ending portions of many Brahmanas have an esoteric content, called the ‘Āraṇyaka’. Embedded in these Āraṇyakas, or normally at their very end, are deeply spiritual treatises called the ‘Upanishads’. For several centuries now, Upanishads are the mainstay of Hindu

spiritual traditions, and are held in the highest esteem.

In the case of the Rigveda, Samaveda and the Atharvaveda, there is a clear-cut separation of the Mantra collection from the Brahmana portions. In contrast, the Yajurveda is of two types: Shukla (or ‘white’) Yajurveda and Krishna (or black) Yajurveda. In the former, the Mantra and Brāhmaṇa collections occur separately from each other. But in the latter, the Mantra and the Brāhmaṇa portions are intermixed. Thus, the Taittiriya ‘Samhitā’ belonging to the Krishna Yajurveda has Mantras interspersed with Brahmana portions. Even the Taittiriya ‘Brahmana’ has both Mantras and Brāhmaṇa passages mixed with each other.

Coming to the Brāhmaṇa texts, there is often no clear-cut distinction between the Brāhmaṇas proper and the Āraṇyakas, or

between the Āraṇyakas and the Upanishads. The Brāhmaṇa text proper often merges into the Āraṇyakas and many old Upanishads are actually embedded in the Āraṇyakas.

There are a few exceptions even to the above generalizations on the internal distinctions in the Vedic texts.

What are Mantras? What are Samhitās?

The mantras are basically hymns sung to the Devas or Deities – the devotional outpourings of the souls of poets. The Samhitās of the four Vedas were compiled for the smooth performance of Vedic ceremonies. Four types of priests are needed to perform a Vedic sacrifice:

- The Hotr priest who sings hymns to Gods inviting them to preside over the sacrifice.

- . The Udgātā priest who sings sweet hymns in musical tones for the entertainment of the Gods
- . The Adhvaryu priest who performs the sacrifice according to strict ritualistic code and makes the offering to the Gods
- . The Brahmā priest well versed in all the Vedas who supervises the sacrifice.

The four Samhitas are said to have been compiled to fulfill the needs of these four main priests: Rk-Samhita for the Hotr, Sama-Samhita for the Udgātā, Yajurveda Samhita for the Adhvaryu and the Atharvaveda Samhita for the Brahma priest. Initially however, there was no special connection of the Brahmā priest with the Atharvaveda, as this Veda was and is not as closely integrated with Vedic ritual as the other three Vedas are.

Mantras are basically of 3 major types, when classified according to their physical form: Riks, Yajus and Sāmans. Riks are versified mantras. Yajus are prose mantras whereas Sāmans are melodies set on Rk.

- . The Rigveda is so called because it is comprised of Riks.
- . The Yajurveda is so called because it is composed predominantly of prose mantras (Yajus) although it has hundreds of Riks as well. However, even the Riks in Yajurveda are recited as if they were prose passages.
- . The Sāmaveda Samhitā is composed of melodies called Sāmans, and also the underlying Riks which are set to these melodies.
- . The Atharvaveda is comprised of Riks (5/6 portion) as well as Yajus (1/6).
Some adept Vedic scholars can set even

the mantras of Atharvaveda to melodies.

In many ways, the Samhitā of the Rigveda constitutes the basis of other Samhitās. Not only is it the most ancient Vedic text, it also contributes hundreds of verses to the other Samhitās. The poetical beauty of the Rigveda and the depth of its meaning are described in the following words by a modern scholar:

“The fact that the verses of the Vedas are poetic in form and liturgical in function warns us against trying to reduce them to strictly rational forms or literal meanings. This sacred wisdom goes far beyond mere intellectual knowledge; it is the wisdom heard and felt in the hearts of the great seers and expressed by them in poem and song so that it might resound in the hearts of all people, awakening them to the

tremendousness, mysteriousness, and joy of their own being as they participate in cosmic creation.”[\[2\]](#)

Theoretically, the Mantras have a higher authority than the Brahmanas.

What are the Brāhmaṇas?

The word ‘Brāhmaṇas’ means ‘through which we can know Brahma’, where ‘Brahma’ is another name for the Vedas. Therefore, the Brāhmaṇas are texts which expound the Vedic mantras and Vedic ritual ceremonies (Yajñas). These scriptures are characterized by statements of eulogy, censure, exposition and (ritual) application (of mantras). Many scholars, modern and ancient, have tried to define the Brāhmaṇas by stating their characteristics. The reality however is that there is no sharp difference in the characteristics of the Mantra and the Brahmana portions of the Vedas. The only

thing that we may state safely is this –
Mantras are those portions of the Vedas that
are designated as such traditionally. And the
rest is Brāhmaṇa.

Unlike the mantras, which are mostly in
verse, the Brāhmaṇas are predominantly
prose. The Brāhmaṇas contain formulas for
rituals, rules and regulations for rites and
sacrifices and also outline other religious
duties. The formulas and rules for
conducting extremely complex rituals are
explained to the minutest detail. And every
ritual is performed for a specific purpose for
which a specific effect/benefit is expected. It
was felt that there was nothing that could not
be achieved by sacrifices – the sun could be
stopped from rising and Indra, the chief of
Deities, could be deposed from his throne.
The duties of men professing different
occupations, the eternity of the Veda,
popular customs, cosmogony, historical

details, and praise of ancient heroes are some other subjects dealt with in the Brāhmaṇas.

What are Āraṇyakas? [3]

The Brāhmaṇas which deal predominantly with Vedic Yajnas fade gradually into more spiritual treatises called the Āraṇyakas.

These scriptures contain several techniques of meditation and they explain the esoteric and mystical meanings of Yajñas. In short, the symbolic and spiritual aspects of the Vedic religion are meditated upon in the Āraṇyakas.

The word Āraṇyaka means “belonging to the wilderness” that is, as Taittiriya Āraṇyakas says, “from where one cannot see the roofs of the settlement”. According to some scholars, the other reason for their name is that this portion of the Vedas was the primary focus of study during the

‘Vānaprastha’ (forest hermit) state of one’s life, when the person retired from active life in his old age to lead a sedentary lifestyle devoted to study of scriptures and performance of specific Vedic Yajñas.

Āraṇyakas are also called ‘Rahasya-Brāhmaṇa’ or the secret portion of the Brāhmaṇas. The Āraṇyakas are ‘secret’ in the sense that

1. They are restricted to a particular class of rituals that nevertheless were frequently included in the Vedic curriculum that was primarily conveyed individually from teacher to student.
2. They convey the non-apparent spiritual meanings of the Vedic ceremonies.

The Āraṇyakas are associated with and named after individual Vedic [shākhās](#) or branches.

1. [Aitareya](#) Āraṇyaka belongs to the Shākala Shākhā of Rigveda
2. [Kaushitakī](#) Āraṇyaka belongs to the Kaushitakī and Shāṅkhāyana Shākhās of Rigveda
3. [Taittiriya](#) Āraṇyaka belongs to the Taittiriya Shākhā of Krishna-Yajurveda
4. [Maitrayaniya](#) Āraṇyaka belongs to the Maitrayaniya Shākhā of Krishna-Yajurveda
5. [Katha](#) Āraṇyaka belongs to the (Charaka) Katha Shākhā of the Krishna-Yajurveda. Only fragments of it survive and are being still published.
6. Brihad- Āraṇyaka in the Mādhyandina and the Kāṇva versions. The Mādhyandina version has 8

sections, of which the last 6 are the Brihadarāṇyaka Upanishad.

7. Talavakāra Āraṇyaka or Jaiminiya Upanisadbrāhmaṇa belongs to the Talavakāra or Jaiminiya Shākhā of Sāmaveda.
8. The first three of the eight chapters of the Chhāndogya Upanishad have the nature of a Āraṇyaka.
9. Āraṇyaka Samhitā The Pūrvārchika of the Sāmaveda Samhitās have a section called the 'Āraṇyaka Samhita' on which the Āranyagāna Sāmans are sung.
10. The Atharvaveda has no surviving Āraṇyaka, though one may regard the Gopatha Brāhmaṇa as its Āraṇyaka, a remnant of a larger Atharva (Paippalāda) Brāhmaṇa.

What are the Upanishads?

The Vedas have highly philosophical portions called the Upanishads, that form the bedrock of Hindu spirituality and theology. The Upanishads typically occur towards the end of the corpus of their respective Vedic Shakha and therefore they are often also called ‘Vedānta’. For example, the Taittiriya Shākhā of Yajurveda is arranged in the following manner: Taittiriya Samhita, Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa and Taittiriya Āraṇyaka. The last 4 of the 10 chapters of the Taittiriya Āraṇyaka comprise the Taittiriya and the Mahānārāyaṇa Upanishads. The presence of the Upanishads towards the end of their respective Vedic corpus indicates that they represent the final conclusion (Siddhānta) of the Veda. This is another reason why they are called Vedanta (Veda + Siddhānta).

Traditionally, the 10 Upanishads on which Ādi Shankarāchārya wrote his commentary are considered the major Upanishads. These 10 Upanishads are:

- . Aitareya Upanishad belonging to the Rigveda
- . Ishāvāsyā and Brihadāraṇyaka Upanishad belonging to the Shukla Yajurveda
- . Taittiriya and Katha Upanishads belonging to the Krishna Yajurveda
- . Chhāndogya and Kena Upanishads belonging to the Sāmaveda
- . Muṇḍaka, Māṇḍukya and Prashna Upanishads belonging to the Atharvaveda.

In addition, the following Upanishads are also considered very ancient and authoritative:

- . Kaushitaki Upanishad belonging to the Rigveda
- . Mahānārāyaṇa, Kaivalya, Shvetashāvatara and Maitrāyaṇīya Upanishad belonging to the Krishna Yajurveda

Tradition lists 108 Upanishads as the major Upanishads, and close to 200 Upanishads survive. However, the above 15 Upanishads and some others (such as Nīlarudra, Chhāgaleya, Ārsheya, Shaunaka, Bāshkalamantra) alone are the ancient Upanishads. Several portions of the Samhitā proper (e.g., the Brahmasūkta of the Atharvaveda),

Brāhmaṇa proper (e.g., the first few sections of the Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa or the Agnirahasya portion of the Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa) and Āraṇyakas (e.g., Chapters 9-10, 14-15 of the Shāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka) are also similar to Upanishads.

Many of the newer Upanishads propound doctrines related to Sannyāsa, Yoga, Sāṃkhya, Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shāktism, worship of Gaṇapati and also summaries and expositions of the newer school of Vedānta such as Advaita Vedānta. Such sectarian Upanishads have been utilized to the hilt by later Hindu teachers to provide the Shruti based ‘proof’ that their sectarian ways are exalted above the other sectarian ways. While doing so, they quote the

Upanishads selectively but never reject the other Upanishadic texts directly or indirectly since the Shruti cannot be rejected at all. For example, the Vaishnava Vedantists quote the Nārāyaṇa Upanishad and similar Upanishads profusely to prove that Lord Vishnu is the Supreme Lord and all other Deities are lesser, explaining away the Shaivite Atharvashīrsha Upanishad. The Shaivite Vedantists do the opposite.

“...Some have referred to the Upanisads as the ‘philosophical’ section of the Vedas. If by ‘philosophical’ one understands a systematic, coherent body of knowledge derived from inferential argument based on an analysis of experience, then these ancient texts are not ‘philosophical.’ In that case, one

cannot criticize them for having a plurality of views that are not always mutually compatible, for being mystical and therefore non-rational in places, or for being didactic, that is, bent on teaching and instruction. The nature of philosophy in the modern Western sense is to be a form of public knowledge, its rational credentials available to the scrutiny of all. But the Upanisads, which ask questions and offer answers on the origins of the universe and the production of being, on the nature of human existence and its goals, the relationship between beings and the source of being etc., attempt this task by continuing the Vedic tradition of private instruction based on personal initiation and passed down from teacher to disciple, by exploring perceived hidden

correspondences between the human microcosm and the cosmic macrocosm, by plumbing the depths and searching the heights of conscious experience, by interiorizing the solemn ritual still further and understanding the role of speech and speech acts in this process, by giving instruction about the good life, by offering teaching about the mystery of death and the after-life, by trying to unify inner and outer being. They are a plural and pluralistic exercise in solving the conundrum of existence for the initiated; they are not systematic philosophical treatises. Nor can they be described as ‘speculative’ as is sometimes asserted; at least not from their point of view. They generally profess to give accredited insights based on experience and inquiry (whether one accept these or not); they

do not claim to be guesswork. This is one reason why they exerted, and still exert, an unparalleled authority among large sections of the Hindu tradition, once their secretive teachings were recorded for posterity and opened up to increasingly wider public.”[\[4\]](#)

Oral Nature of Vedic Scriptures



The Vedic texts were traditionally transmitted orally (or at least predominantly without the aid of manuscripts, which might have been used sparingly as memory aids). This was essential because the texts were ‘accented’, or in other words the different

words or letters therein were recited according to different pitch/tones. Very elaborate mnemonic devices were developed to preserve the texts with great fidelity, and harsh Divine vengeance and evil repercussions were promised to those who deformed or mutilated the text in any manner. As a result, several Vedic texts were indeed transmitted over several millennia with utmost fidelity, together with accent. It took several years for a student to memorize one or more Vedic texts, word for word, letter for letter, with the correct accent, under the personal supervision of a competent teacher. The texts that are used for aiding the memorization and recitation of the Vedas with utmost fidelity, are called ‘Lakṣhaṇa Granthas’. These texts include Anukramaṇīs, Padapāthas, Ghanapāthas, Kramapātha and other Vikrtis or modifications of the root text, phonetic

treatises like Shikshās and Prātishākyas
and so on.

Chapter 7

The prominent or the most important Smritis are those of Manu, Yājñavalkya and Parāshara. Other important Smritis are those by Shankha-Likhita, Harita, Brihaspati, Atri, Daksha, Nārada etc.

Vedāngas

These are six branches of learning whose knowledge is considered a pre-requisite to learning the Vedas. They are: Kalpa (ritual), Vyākaraṇa (grammar), shikshā (phonetics), Nirukta (Etymology), Jyotisha (astronomy) and Chhanda (Prosody)

Phonetics (Shikshās)

Shikshā is one of the six [Vedangas](#), treating the traditional [Hindu](#) science of [phonetics](#) and [phonology](#) of [Sanskrit](#).

Its aim is the teaching of the correct pronunciation of the [Vedic hymns](#) and [mantras](#). The oldest phonetic textbooks are the Prātishākyas (prātiśākhya, a [vrddhi](#) abstract from [Sanskrit](#) prati-śākhā), describing pronunciation, intonation of Sanskrit, as well as the Sanskrit rules of [sandhi](#) (word combination), specific to individual schools or [Shakhas](#) of the Vedas.

The Prātishakhyas, which evolved from the more ancient [padapāthas](#) around c. 500 BCE, deal with the manner in which the Vedas are to be enunciated.

Eight Prātishākyas are preserved today:

- [Rigveda](#)-Prātishākyā ([Shākala](#) shākhā), attributed to [Shaunaka](#)
- [Shukla](#)–[Yajurveda](#)-Prātishākhya
- [Taittiriya](#) (Krishṇa Yajurveda) Prātishākhya

- Sāmatantram. A portion of it is also called Aksharatantra, and is often taken to be a separate text.
- Riktantram (Sāmaveda). A versified abridgment of this text called the Laghuriktantra also exists.
- Pushpa Sūtra (Sāmaveda), also called the Phulla Sūtra
- [Atharvaveda](#)-Prātishākhya (Shaunakīya shākhā)
- Shaunakiya Chaturādhyāyikā (Shaunakīya shākhā)

Several others known to exist till recent centuries have been lost. A manuscript of Maitrāyaṇīya Prātishākhya existed till a few decades back for instance. Likewise, the Bāshkala Prātishākhya belonging to Rigveda is found quoted in literature.

In addition, several other Shikshā texts are preserved, such as Vyāsa Shikshā, Yājñavalkya Shikshā, Panini Shikshā, Āpishali Shikshā, Māṇḍukī Shikshā, Kaṇḍinya Shikshā and so on.

Grammar (Vyākaraṇa)

Will be dealt in future articles.

Ritual (Kalpasūtras)

Kalpa Sūtras are systematic and practical, aphoristic treatises laying down the procedures for the performance of Vedic rituals for its adherents. The Kalpa sūtra are typically aligned to one of these recensions or Shākhās of the Vedas. For instance, the Baudhāyana texts are aligned with the Taittiriya Samhitā, Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa and the Taittiriya Āraṇyaka. So is the case with the sutras of Āpastamba, Bhāradvāja, Hiranyakeshin, Vaikhānasa and so on.

Types of the Kalpa Literature

1. *Shrauta Sūtras*: The Shrauta rituals are very complex Vedic rituals requiring the use of the 3 Vedic fires. They employ Vedic mantras in their liturgy and often require a team of specialist priests for their performance. The Shrauta Sūtras often form the core text of the entire Kalpa Sūtra, and the following Grhya Sūtra etc., presuppose their existence.

2. *Grhya Sūtras*: Deal with the domestic fire rituals. The Grhya rituals are comparatively simple, and can be performed by a householder without the aid of priests. They employ only one fire and their liturgy consists of collections of verses taken from various Vedic texts.

3. *Dharma Sūtras*: These are like the laws of Manu, being codes of conduct. The Dharma sūtras are manuals of ethical instruction. Unlike the Shrauta and the Grhya sūtras that

restrict themselves to the parent Vedic school, the Dharma Sūtras are more general in their sphere of instruction. They cover the duties and the rights of people belonging to different stages of life and castes, contain instructions on ritual purity, morals, atonements for various sins, and the kārmic result of various sinful and virtuous actions and so on.

4. *Shulvasutras*: These are mathematical/geometrical treatises dealing with the construction of altars of various shapes and sizes for the performance of Vedic sacrifices. They are often included in the Shrauta Sūtras.

5. *Pitrmedha Sūtras*: Treatises on cremation of the dead. They lay down the correct procedure for the funeral ceremony, for adherence by the son or a close relative of the deceased person. Often included in the Shrauta Sūtras or appended to the Grhya

Sūtras. The surviving texts in this class are those of Āpastamba (or Bhāradvāja), Baudhāyana, Gautama

6. *Pravara sutras*: List of various lineages, and clans and their progenitors of these clans and so on.

7. *Other miscellaneous texts*: Parishishtas, snāna sūtras and so on.

The following chart gives some of the major **surviving** Kalpasutras related to the different Vedas:

#	Veda	Shrauta Sutra	Grihya Sutra	Dharma Sutra	Shulba Sutra
1	Rigveda	Āshvalāyana, Shāṅkhāyana, Kaushitaki	Āshvalāyana, Shāṅkhāyana Kaushitaki	Vasishtha	X
2	Sāmaveda	Mashaka, Ārsheya, Lātyāyana, Drāhyāyana Nidāna, Pratihāra, Upanidāna, Anupada, Kalpānupada, Gāyatravidhāna, Jaiminiya	Khādira Gobhila Gautama Drāhyāyana Jaiminiya	Gautama	X

3	Shukla Yajurveda	Kātyāyana	Pāraskara, Kātyāyana	X	Kātyāyana
			Baudhāyana,		
			Agniveshya, Mānava,		
		Baudhāyana, Mānava,	Hirañyakeshin, Vādhūla,	Baudhāyana, Hirañyakeshin,	Baudhāyana, Mānava,
		Hirañyakeshin, Vādhūla,	Āpastamba,	Āpastamba,	Hirañyakeshin, Vādhūla,
4	Krishna Yajurveda	Āpastamba,	Kathaka (Laugakshi)	Haarita	Āpastamba,
		Vaikhānasa, Vārāha,	Vaikhānasa,	Vaikhānasa,	Maitrāyaṇīya
		Bhāradvāja	Vārāha	Vishṇu	Varāha
			Kapishthala		
			Bhāradvāja		
			Kaushika		
			Shanti Kalpa		
5	Atharvaveda	Vaitāna	Nakshatra Kalpa, Āngirasa Kalpa	X	X

Many of these Kalpa Sūtras have commentaries written on them by later scholars, and therefore form a vast literature in themselves.

Jyotisha (Astronomy)

Unlike later texts on Jyotisha which deal mainly with Astrology, the Vedanga texts of Jyotisha deal with astronomy. The division of time in smaller units, planetary motions and positions and so on were of vital importance to plan and execute Vedic rituals per a pre-determined schedule and per the proper procedure. The Rigveda and Yajurveda have a Vedānga Jyotisha authored by Rishi Lagadha whereas the Atharvaveda Jyotisha is authored by Rishi Kashyapa. In later times, the astrology aspect of Jyotisha became a very popular tradition in the Hindu society and dozens of texts belong to astrology exist. However, texts on astrology do not strictly fall within the Vedānga category and should be studied separately because they do not have any direct Vedic connection.

Nirukta (Etymology)

This Vedānga deals with derivation and etymology of Vedic words and supplements Grammar. It comprises of a lexicon called Nighantu and a commentary on it by Rishi Yāska called the Nirukta. In the tradition of Atharvaveda, a Kautsavya Nirukta also survives. Many older works in this category by Shākapūṇi, Upamanyu etc., have not survived but are found quoted in existing works.

Chhanda (Prosody)

Much of Vedic Samhitas comprise of verses that have a fixed number of syllables arranged in particular order. The oldest surviving work on Vedic Meter is by Pingala Muni, who is said to be the younger brother of the great grammarian Panini. This subject matter is also dealt with in several ancient surviving works such as the

Chhandovichiti of Patanjali and the Rik-Prātishākhya of Shaunaka.

The main principle of Vedic meter is measurement by the number of syllables. The metrical unit of verse is the pada (“foot”), generally of eight, eleven, or twelve syllables; these are termed gāyatrī, [trishtubh](#) and jagatī respectively, after meters of the same name. A Richa is a stanza of typically three or four padas, with a range of two to seven found in the corpus of Vedic poetry. Stanzas may mix padas of different lengths, and strophes of two or three stanzas (respectively, pragātha and tricha) are common.

In the Indian tradition, it is customary to know three things about each mantra : The devatā (deity), the Rishi (the speaker) and the Chhanda (the poetical meter). It is forbidden to study the Vedas without

knowing these 3 things about the mantras. All good editions of the Vedas explicitly list these 3 for each mantra at the beginning of each chapter, sūкта (hymn) and so on. Many of the meters of the Vedic verses (like Ushnika, Gayatri, Jagati etc.) are actually mentioned in some mantras of the Rigveda, Atharvaveda etc., implying that knowledge of prosody was presumed by the Rishis of these mantras.

Each Veda also has traditionally a sequential list/tabulation of meters for all verses called the Chhando'anukramaṇī. The Chhando'anukramaṇī of RV is written by Sage Shaunaka. It was later incorporated into a more general Anukramaṇī (list) by Kātyāyana who is placed at 4th to 2nd Cent. BCE. The Chhando'anukramaṇī of Atharvaveda is a part of the 'Brihatsarvanukramaṇi' which is an undateable text but very old nevertheless.

The Chhando'anukramaṇī of Samaveda is so old that it is accorded the rank of a 'Brāhmaṇa' (scriptural cannon) text.

Upavedas

The term Upaveda (“applied knowledge”) is used in traditional literature to designate the subjects of certain technical works. Lists of what subjects are included in this class differ among sources. A commonly accepted list is as —

1. Medicine ([Āyurveda](#)), associated with the Rigveda. The major texts of this Upaveda are Charaka Samhitā, Sushruta Samhita, Bhela Samhitā, Hārita Samhitā and Kāshyapa Samhitā. But [Sushruta Samhitā](#) and [Bhāvaprakāsha](#) mention Āyurveda as an Upaveda of the Atharvaveda.

2. Military Science ([Dhanurveda](#)), associated with the Yajurveda. The main surviving texts are Nītiprakāshikā of Vaishampāyana, Dhanurveda of Vashishtha and Īshvara Samhitā of Shiva.
3. Music and [sacred dance](#) ([Gāndharvaveda](#)), associated with the Sāmaveda
4. Arthashāstra ([Economics](#)), associated with the Atharvaveda. The Arthashāstra of Kautilya is the oldest surviving text in this genre. The Arthasūtras of Brihaspati and some other later texts also survive, but the original texts of Indra etc., are considered lost.
5. Sometimes, the Shilpa-Sthāpatya Veda (dealing with architecture and construction) is also considered as the fourth Upaveda attached to the Atharvaveda. Several texts survive in

this class – Mayamatam, Vāstuvidyā of Vishvakarma etc.

It may be noted that whereas the Vedas and their allied literature focus more on Dharma and Moksha amongst the 4 Purushārthas, the Upavedas focus more on the Artha and Kāma Purushārthas.

Chapter 8

The Purāṇas may be thought of as core texts of Hindu religiosity; some have become cornerstones of particular devotional traditions, and others have served as templates for institutions, social observances, and traditions of secular knowledge.

Purāṇas

These texts are extensive compendiums of the history and sacred traditions of Bhāratvarṣa (the earlier name of the Indian subcontinent). The Purāṇas may be thought of as core texts of Hindu religiosity; some have become cornerstones of particular devotional traditions, and others have served as templates for institutions, social observances, and traditions of secular

knowledge. They combine elements from the Vedas, Upanishads, Darshanas, Āgamas, Itihāsas etc. to present an eclectic form of Hindu Dharma to the lay people.

The word Purāṇa itself means “ancient,” and a good deal of Purāṇic lore may have coexisted with the Vedas themselves. An early datable definition is found in the sixth-century lexicon *Amarakosha*, which identifies Purāṇa as that which has five characteristics (*pañcalakṣhaṇa*):

1. *sarga* (creation);
2. *pratisarga* (re-creation of the universe after its dissolution);
3. *vamsha* (genealogies of gods, sages, kings, and patriarchs);
4. *manvantara* (cyclic ages of humanity presided over by Manu, the father of humanity); and

5. *Vamshānucharitham* (royal dynastic histories).

Although the Purāṇas all contain variations on these themes, none of them literally follows this definition, because the *pañchalakṣhaṇa* materials only make up a small percentage of their volume. Other topics covered include

1. The *purushārthas*,
2. Descriptions, glorification and procedures of different Hindu spiritual practices and rituals, and other religious observances.
3. Information about pilgrimage centers – their location, the reason for their holiness, their history, rituals to be performed when visiting these centers and so on.
4. Charitable offerings.

5. Rites for the dead.
6. Beautiful hymns in praise of different Hindu deities. Sacred narratives about different Hindu deities. The glorification of various divinities.
7. Sacred narratives of the spiritual journey of different Sages, saints and great men.
8. descriptions of cycles of time, cosmographies of space (including graphic images of heavens and hells),
9. philosophy and doctrinal expositions, sacraments,
10. Social duties as well as treatises on yoga, sacrifice, and other spiritual practices,
11. History of different jaati groups

There are 4 major types of Purāṇas:

12. Mahāpurāṇas or Major Purāṇas

13. Upapurāṇas and Aupapurāṇas or
Minor and Sub-purāṇas
14. Sthala Purāṇas or Mahātmyas:
Regional purāṇas
15. Kula or Jāti purāṇas or Caste/Family
purāṇas

The Purāṇas are works that most eminently represent the deep mythic structuring of Hindu civilization, and they are properly viewed as expanding upon, modifying, and transforming the orthodox religion of the Vedas, principally by the introduction of the idea of bhakti or devotion. It is the Purāṇas which, it is no exaggeration to say, assisted in the transition from Vedic religion to classical Hinduism, particularly a Hinduism that was more receptive to folk elements, popular forms of devotion and worship, and everyday arts, crafts, and sciences. The Purāṇas carry story about the gods who had

become the objects of people's devotion, as well as about the modes of worship of these gods; these gods are no longer Vedic gods, but the gods who form the Hindu trinity.

Besides them, the Purāṇas speak of the battle between the devas and the asuras, and one can doubtless read the narratives as allegorical accounts of the struggle within each person between the forces of 'light' and the forces of 'darkness'. The Purāṇas delineate the religious obligations by which each person is bound, and as such they are a guide to Dharmic living. The Purāṇas are a vast repository of Hindu lore, religious practices — yoga, vows, puja, prayers, sacrifices — and everyday customs.

The most popular among the Purāṇas is the Shrimad Bhagavata. The Shrimad Bhāgavata Purāṇa is a chronicle of the various incarnations of Lord Vishnu, but focuses on Krishna. Each Purāṇa has a

specific purpose and was first narrated on a special occasion. The purpose of the Shrimad Bhāgavata Purāṇa is to enable a person to overcome the fear of death.

Skukadeva, the son of Vyāsa narrated it to King Parikshit, when Parikshit was cursed to die in a week's time. Since then, it has become a Hindu custom to arrange for week long recitals of this scripture in public gatherings.

1 Mahāpuraṇas: A list of eighteen Mahāpurāṇas (Great Purāṇas) accepted traditionally and often named after the principal narrator of the work, is as follows:

1. *Brahma* (or *Ādi*, first)
2. *Padma* (Lotus)
3. *Vishṇu* ("all-pervading" deity)
4. *Vāyu* (deity of the wind)
5. *Bhāgavata* (Vishṇu and his 24 Avatāras)

6. *Nārada* (sage son of Brahmā)
7. *Mārkaṇḍeya* (great sage)
8. *Agni* (Vedic fire deity)
9. *Bhaviṣya* (future)
10. *Brahmavaivarta* (transformation of Brahmā)
11. *Linga* (symbol of Śhiva)
12. *Varāha* (Vishnu as a boar)
13. *Skanda* (god of war and son of Śhiva)
14. *Vāmana* (Vishnu as a *brahman* dwarf)
15. *Kūrma* (Vishnu as a tortoise)
16. *Matsya* (Vishnu as a fish)
17. *Garuḍa* (Vishnu's bird carrier)
18. *Brahmānṇḍa* (the egg of Brahmā)

These eighteen Mahāpurāṇas, said to contain a total of 400,000 verses, are attributed to the divine sage Vyāsa, who is said have arranged the revealed material (along with the Vedas and epics) and transmitted them

to disciples who further elaborated upon them. To the above list, the Shiva Purāṇa is also typically added, bringing the number of Mahāpurāṇas to 19. It is believed that there was originally 1 Purāṇa that later lead to these 19 Purāṇas.

One method of the classification of Purāṇas deploys the traditional tripartite division of the guṇas or qualities which tend toward purity (*sattva*), impurity or ignorance (*tamas*), and passion (*rajas*). Thus, there are those Purāṇas where the quality of *sattva* is said to predominate, and these are six in number: Vishnu; Narada; Bhāgavata; Garuda; Padma; and Varāha. According to another scheme of classification, these are also the Purāṇas in which Vishnu appears as the Supreme Being.

A second set of Purāṇas, also six in number, are described as exhibiting qualities of

ignorance or impurity (*tamas*), and in these Shiva is the God to whom devotion is rendered: Matsya; Kurma; Linga; Shiva; Skanda; and Agni. In the third set of six Purāṇas, the quality of *rajas* or blind passion supposedly prevails: Brahma; Brahmāṇḍa; Brahmavaivarta; Markaṇḍeya; Bhaviṣya; and Vāmana. Yet clearly this mode of classification, which shows every sign of sectarianism, is inadequate, since none of the Purāṇas is devoted exclusively to either Vishnu or Shiva.

Among these Purāṇas, the Vishnu Purāṇa and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa (also known as the Bhāgavatam) are, with respect to their standing as works of devotional literature, preeminent; and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa is even the supreme work of Krishna devotional literature. Since each of the eighteen major Purāṇas enumerates the other Purāṇas, it is reasonable to surmise that all

the Purāṇas were revised at one point. Their length varies considerably: the Skanda has 80,000 couplets, while the Brahma and Vāmana Purāṇas have 10,000 couplets each.

2 Upapurāṇas and Aupapurāṇas or Minor and Sub-purāṇas: The Upapurāṇas are lesser or ancillary texts: these are sometimes also said to be eighteen in number, with still less agreement as to the canonical titles. Few have been critically edited. They include: Sanat-kumāra, [Narasimha](#), Brihan-nārādīya, Shiva-rahasya, Durvāsa, Kapila, Vāmana, Bhārgava, Varuṇa, [Kalika](#), [Sāmba](#), Nandi, Sūrya, Parāshara, Vasishtha, Devi-Bhāgavata, [Gaṇesha](#), [Mudgala](#), Viṣṇudharmottara, Viṣṇudharma, Shivadharma, Shivadharmaottara and Hamsa.

The Gaṇesha and Mudgala Puranas are devoted to [Ganesha](#). The [Devi-Bhāgavata](#)

[Purana](#), which extols the goddess [Durga](#), has become (along with the Devi Mahatmya of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purana) a basic text for [Devi](#) worshipers. The Viṣṇudharmottara is devoted to Lord Viṣṇu and so on. It has some of the earliest information from India on painting, sculpture etc., and has chapters devoted to symbolism of Viṣṇu and other Devatas.

There are many others all over the [Indian](#) subcontinent: most (such as the Padma Purāṇa of Bengal and Assam, narrating the story of the goddess [Manasā](#)), written in vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit.

3 Sthala Purāṇas: This corpus of texts tells of the origins and traditions of particular temples or shrines – the word ‘Sthala’ means ‘Place’ in Sanskrit. There are numerous Sthala Purāṇas, most written in [vernaculars](#), some with Sanskrit versions as

well. Some appear in Sanskrit versions in the Mahapurāas or Upapurānas.

4 Kula Purānas: These Purānas deal with a caste's origin myth, stories and legends (the word 'Kula' means 'Family' or 'Tribe' in Sanskrit). They are important sources for caste identity though usually contested by rival castes. Examples include the Vishvakarma Purāna of the Vishvakarma architect Brahmana community of Andhra Pradesh in India.

Itihāsas and Gitā

The ancient [Sanskrit epics](#), the [Ramayana](#) and [Mahabharata](#), also termed Itihāsa (History) or Mahākāvya ("Great Compositions"), refer to epic poems that form a [canon](#) of [Hindu scripture](#). Appended to the Mahabharata is a supplement called the Harivamsha Purāna.

1 Mahābhārata: Comprising of almost 100,000 verses, it is 8 times the length of the Greek Epics Illiad and Odyssey put together. Tradition says that the epic grew in size from 8800 verses to its current extent of 100,000 verses in several stages. The current form of the epic is dated to before 400 C.E. Hindus believe that the Mahabharata was originally compiled by Veda Vyāsa.

The Mahabharata is divided into 18 major books called Parvans. The Bhagavad Gita, one of the most important Hindu scriptures, is embedded in the 6th Parvan titled the Bhishma Parvan. The Gita has 700 verses in the form of a dialog between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, and some narrative verses by Sanjaya and Dhritrashtra. This beloved scripture of Hindus summarizes all the different strands of Hindu philosophy and is considered the essence of all Vedas. See Appendix I for details on the Gita.

The third Parvan (Āraṇyaka Parvan), 12th (Shanti Parvan) and 13th Parvan (Anushāsana) also contain thousands of passages related to Artha, Kāma, Dharma and Moksha. The story of Mahabharata is too well known to repeat here. The Mahabharata is said to be the longest (or sometimes the second longest) poem in the world. It has been said that whatever is not in the Mahabharata is not to be found elsewhere. The Harivamsha Purāṇa, comprising of 15,000 verses, narrates the story of Lord Krishna and his family.

2 The Ramayana of Vālmīki: This famous Hindu epic, the source of several epics all over Eastern Asia, comprises of 24,000 verses arranged within 7 books. Hindus regard Lord Rama, who is considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, as an ideal son, husband and king. The story of Ramayana is too well known to be repeated here.

Numerous Sages and poets have rendered this popular Hindu scripture in Sanskrit and almost 16 Sanskrit versions of this text, based on the original, exist today. In addition, Saint Poets all over India have also written vernacular versions of the Ramayana in their respective mother tongues.

Amongst the countries outside the Indian subcontinent where this epic has been rendered in the local languages are: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, China (Yunnan province), and Japan etc.

Chapter 9

The Hindu personal law in India is largely derived from the Mitāksharā commentary on the Yājñavalkya Smṛiti, in view of its great popularity in large parts of India during the last few centuries.

Dharmashāstras Or Smritis

The four aims of life are artha (wealth), kāma (desire), dharma (virtue) and moksha (liberation). The literature regarding dharma are the Dharma Shāstras which deal with the laws and regulations governing the social and ethical life of the individual in his society. There are four ways to determine right and wrong – the shruti (Vedas), smṛiti (dharma shāstras etc.), good conduct and conscience. The moral code is not

considered as static – it is to be learned in each generation from what wise men who are good and free from hatred and attachment, declare.

The Dharma Shāstras believes in the four fold order of the society (the chāturvarṇya system popularly known as the “caste system”) which divides the society into four main groups where the hierarchy flows as – the priest (Brahmin), the warrior (kshatriya), the merchant (vaishya) and the laborer (shudra).

The dharma shāstras advocate the āshrama system or the four stages of life for a dvija – the student (brahmachārin), the householder (grihastha), the forest dweller (vānaprastha) and the wandering mendicant (sannyāsin). The purpose of the āshrama system is to enable the dvijas to perform their secular

duties in the society and also lead a life conducive to the attainment of moksha.

The prominent or the most important Smritis are those of Manu, Yājñavalkya and Parāshara. Other important Smritis are those by Shankha-Likhita, Harita, Brihaspati, Atri, Daksha, Nārada etc. The Dharma Sūtras belonging to the Kalpa Sūtra collections are sometimes also classified as Smritis.

Traditionally, the Manu Smriti is considered the most complete and authoritative Smriti although a later tradition asserts that the Parāshara Smriti is more valid for modern times. The Hindu personal law in India is largely derived from the Mitāksharā commentary on the Yājñavalkya Smriti, in view of its great popularity in large parts of India during the last few centuries. The Nārada Smriti specializes in legal jurisprudence and deals with these subjects

in a very advanced manner (similar to modern works) even though it is almost a 2000 year old recast of an older work!

Āgamas

These are treatises on theology and practical manuals on worship for the different Hindu traditions. Traditionally, the Āgamas are five-fold, aligned with the five major sampradāyas of classical Hinduism:

1. **Vaishnava Āgamas:** These Āgamas are considered authoritative by Hindus who worship the Divinity in the form of Vishnu or his incarnations. These include several subtypes in turn –
 1. Pāñcharātra Āgamas: They are a collection of several dozen individual scriptures, of which the main ones are three – Sātvata, Paushkara and Jayākhyaya.

2. **Vaikhānasa Āgamas:** They are four in number, and are believed to have been authored by Sages Atri, Marichi, Bhrigu and Kashyapa respectively.
3. **Bhāgavata:** Very few works such as the Sātvata Tantra survive today.
2. **Shaiva Āgamas:** They are 28 in number. The followers of these Āgamas worship Divinity in the form of Shiva. There are two main Sampradāyas of the followers of Shaiva Āgamas:
 1. Pratyabhijna or Kashmir Shaivism
 2. Shaiva Siddhānta
3. **Shākta Āgamas or Tantras:** These are a collection of 71 scriptures called Tantras which are considered authoritative together with the Vedas by Hindus who worship Divinity in the form of Shakti – the Universal Mother. The Shaiva and Shākta Āgamas are often

considered complimentary because Shakti is the consort of Lord Shiva.

4. **Saura Āgamas:** No works in this category survive. These Āgamas were meant for Hindus who worshipped divinity in the form of Sun.
5. **Gāṇapatya Āgamas:** These were meant for Hindus who worshipped Gaṇapati. Again, no works in this class survive today.

Regarding the purpose of these scriptures, a scholar says –

“The purpose of worship is to lift man from the level of sensibility to that of divinity by making proper use of his very senses. The technique by which this is done has come to be called Tantra in India. The Tantras are the books which initiate the devotee into the technique of worship. They are also known as the Agamas. And, the cults which are

based in these Scriptures are usually referred to as Tantric cults.”[\[1\]](#)

Tantras or Āgamas have had a profound impact on the way Hinduism is practiced in our daily lives. Most of our domestic and temple rituals are derived from Tantric teachings. Directions for fasts, vows etc., are also dealt with in the Tantras. In a way, the Āgamas parallel the Vedas (which are also called ‘Nigama’) but the essential differences between the two can be summarized in the following words:

The Tantras are sometimes known as Agamas to differentiate them from the Vedas, which are known as Nigamas. The difference between Agamas and Nigamas is that the Agamas focus on the worship of a deity with form, i.e. Saguna brahman, while Nigamas focus on the worship of a formless diety, nirguna brahman. Agamas

tend to be more exoteric and celebrate the tangible while the Nigamas are esoteric and celebrate the intangible. Agamas give greater value to the emotions that are provoked by the ritual while Nigamas give greater value to the intellectual decoding of the ritual. Agamas approach Prakriti first and then Purusha, while Nigamas approach Purusha first and then Prakriti. In Tantras, Goddess is Shakti or power, to be decoded, while in the Vedas, Goddess is Maya, delusion, to be transcended.[\[2\]](#)

Darshana Shastras

These are six systems of classical Hindu Philosophy and Theology and several other later minor schools of Philosophy. Details of this class of literature will be considered in Class 12.

Name of Darshana	Main Text	Main Commentary	Description, distinctive features
Nyāya	Gautama Nyāya Sūtras	Commentary of Vātsyāyana	Hindu logic
Vaisheshika	Kaṇāda's Sūtras	Commentary of Prashastapāda	Material properties and categories, nature of Atman etc, atomic theory
Sāmkhya	Kārikas of Īshvara Krishna, Sāmkhya Sūtras of Kapila (?)	Commentaries of Vāchaspati Mishra on Kārika, Aniruddha and Vijnānabhikshu on Sūtras	Duality of Matter and Spirit
Yoga	Sūtras of Patanjali	Commentary of Vyāsa	Philosophy behind meditation, eightfold path of Yoga
Mimāṃsā	Sūtras of Jaimini	Commentary of Shabara, Kumārila Bhatta and Prabhākara Mishra	Interpretation of Brāhmaṇa texts dealing with Vedic ritual ceremonies
Vedānta	Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa (Vyāsa)	Commentaries of Shankarāchārya, Rāmānujāchārya, Madhvāchārya and Vallabhāchārya	Hindu spirituality based on Upanishads

Non Classical and later schools of philosophy include Pratyabhijna (or Kashmir Shaivism), Shaktism (Agastya Sutra), Bhakti (works of Narada and Shandilya) and so on.

For the last 1000 years or so, the Vedānta Darshana (and in particular, the schools of Shankarāchārya, Rāmānujāchārya, Madhvāchārya and Vallabhāchārya have become the dominant theology and philosophy acceptable to Hindus, with the Nyāya Darshana holding sway in some parts of eastern India. In fact, when Hindus refer to Hindu spirituality, they most commonly mean the Vedānta and its various interpretations of the Upanishads. The Yoga school is also very popular in so far as the practice of meditation is concerned and is gaining considerable popularity in the West.

This does not mean that the other Darshanas are extinct. It is more accurate to say that most of the principles of other Darshanas such as the Sāmkhya, were incorporated into the Vedānta schools.

Devotional Literature

A vast corpus of devotional Hindu literature comprising of hymns (stotras and stavas), individual verses (shlokas) in praise of different Deities, short narratives of incidents from the lives of Hindu saints and sages (kathā and other names), renderings of specific episodes from the Itihāsas and Purāṇas (kathā and other names), glories of holy places (mahātmyas) and so on exist in Sanskrit and other languages spoken by Hindus. Literally dozens of such works are composed every decade by pious Hindus. Some of these works have attained great popularity as well as sanctity over the centuries, and are recited and used in religious ceremonies by Hindus every day. A better account of such works in non-Sanskritic languages is contained in the next section.

[\[1\]](#) T. M. P. Mahadevan, p. 180

[\[2\]](#) Pattanaik (2011), pp. 119-120

Featured Image: Boldsky

Chapter 10

Hindu tradition states that the rules of Sanskrit as well as Tamil grammar were both formulated by Lord Shiva, and the latter were subsequently written down by Sage Agastya in the work Tolkappiyam. Just as Sanskrit is called the ‘Language of Gods’, Tamil too is credited with a Divine origin and is said to have originated from Lord Shiva himself.

**Sanskrit: “More Perfect than Greek,
More Copius than Latin”**

Sanskrit was the major language used for liturgy, science, philosophy and literature for almost 2000 years over a vast geographical area stretching from Afghanistan in the west, to Indonesia in the east. Perhaps no other language in the world

has enjoyed such a prominence over such a vast area for such a long period of time. Hindus consider Sanskrit as ‘Devabhāshā’ or the language of the gods, and most of Hindu sacred literature is composed in Sanskrit. India has perhaps 5 million surviving manuscripts, said to be the largest of any country in the world, and about 65% of these are said to be in Sanskrit.

The discovery of Sanskrit Grammar by European scholars revolutionized the study of grammars of European languages in the 18th century. Sir William Jones (1746-1794 C.E.) was one of the first scholars to notice the deep similarity between Greek, Avestan (the language of Parsi scriptures) and Sanskrit and proposed that these languages originated from a single ancestor. Subsequently, Sanskrit was noted to be related to practically all of modern European languages in the family of ‘Indo-European’

languages, and no other ancient European language has literature that compares in antiquity or extent to the Vedic literature.

The realization that Sanskrit was a very ancient language and related to several other languages of Europe demolished the Biblical myth once for all that Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, was the Universal Divine language given to mankind at the beginning of the Creation.

Phonetics: The word ‘Sanskrit’ means ‘refined’ or ‘made perfect’, and indicates the fact that Sanskrit is a very beautiful and a perfected language. Its phonetics (sound system) is much superior to most modern languages (such as English), and its sonorous quality makes it possible to sing even prose passages written in this language. The beauty and rhythm of religious verses composed in Sanskrit easily inspires

devotion towards the Divine in the mind of the person who recites them.

Vedic Sanskrit, which is an older form of Sanskrit in which Vedic scriptures of Hindus are written, is an ‘accented’ language. This means that the different letters in the same word can have a different pitch, giving rise to different meanings. Even today, the Vedic scriptures are recited from memory by hundreds of Hindus together with their traditional accents! Hindus were probably the first to analyze the different sounds of speech and arrange them in a logical order, whereas even the modern Roman script (used for writing English) arranges the 26 alphabets in a very random and haphazard manner!

Grammar: Several Sages systematized the grammar of Sanskrit, and their efforts culminated in Sage Panini’s masterpiece

named ‘Ashtaadhyaayi’ (around 450 BCE), a short book of grammar containing a little less than 4000 pithy rules (Sutras). The system of grammar taught by Panini is considered so perfect that the language bound by these rules was considered the best human language for use in fifth generation computers. It has been remarked[\[1\]](#):

“Panini should be thought of as the forerunner of the modern formal language theory used to specify computer languages. The Backus Normal Form was discovered independently by John Backus in 1959, but Panini’s notation is equivalent in its power to that of Backus and has many similar properties. It is remarkable to think that concepts which are fundamental to today’s theoretical computer science should have their origin with an Indian genius around 2500 years ago.”



Sage Panini (Source: Wikipedia)

Around 350 BCE, Sage Katyayana wrote an additional 4000 rules (called ‘Vaarttikas’) on Panini’s grammar, whereas Sage Patanjali composed a giant explanation, the ‘Mahabhashya’ on these two works combined around 150 BCE. These three grammarians are called the ‘*Munitraya*’ (the three Sages) of Sanskrit grammar, and the form of Sanskrit systematized by them has been considered the standard form of

Sanskrit for the last 2500 years. There are very few languages in the world that have remained relatively unchanged for such a long period of time.

Prosody and Kāvya: In addition to having perfected phonetics and grammar, Sanskrit has very well developed systems of prosody (Chhanda) and literary theory (Kāvya). The latter achieved dazzling heights under the auspices of Dandin of Tamil Nadu (6th century C.E.), Anandavardhana of Kashmir (9th century C.E.) and Panditaraja Jagannatha of north India (16th – 17th century C.E.). The Sanskrit dramas of Kalidasa (4th century C.E.) are so exquisite that he is often termed as the ‘Shakespeare of the East’, although it would be more apt to term Shakespeare as the ‘Kalidasa of the West’ since the former lived more than a 1000 years later than the Kalidasa. The Natyashastra of Bharat Muni, originally

composed more than 2000 years ago, might well be the oldest surviving treatise on drama and theater in the whole world!

Philosophical Literature: Sanskrit was used as it was the language in which Hindus, Buddhists and Jains wrote a lot of their sacred literature. Due to this fact, its philosophical and religious vocabulary is very well developed. Perhaps no other language has a larger storehouse of scriptures as does Sanskrit. Even though much of this literature has been lost, the surviving portion itself comprises several thousand titles – perhaps more than in any other classical language of the world. And even though many of these scriptures are now available in translation, reading them in their original language has the benefit of being able to understand the underlying ideas and principles more accurately. The Mahabharata, written in Sanskrit, is said to

be the longest poem in the world. It is 8 times the length of the Greek epics Iliad and Odyssey put together. Even the surviving portion of Vedic literature is six times the length of the entire Bible – and much older.

Scientific Literature: Sanskrit has a vast storehouse of scientific literature that continues to draw attention of the modern man. Sanskrit treatises in architecture (Vaastushastra), medicine (Ayurveda), Veterinary science of elephants and horses, horticulture and so on written centuries ago fare quite well when compared to modern books on these topics. Much of this literature still awaits publication because it lies in manuscript form.

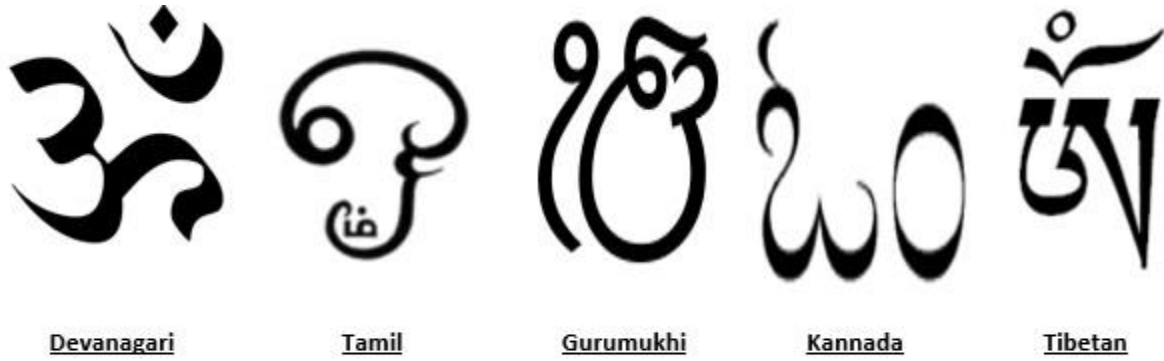
Proverbs and Parables: Sanskrit also has a very extensive collection of maxims or proverbs (called ‘Subhāshitas’) that give good advice on various aspects of our

religious and secular lives. Several ancient anthologies or collections of interesting parables and interesting stories teaching moral values exist in Sanskrit. Examples include the Pañchatantra of Vishnu Sharma, and Hitopadesha of Narayana Pandita. Many of these Sanskrit collections are now acknowledged as sources of stories occurring in the 1001 Arabian Nights stories and several other international collections.

Source of and Influence of other

Languages: Almost 80% of the people living in the Indian Subcontinent speak a language that is derived from Sanskrit. It has also profoundly influenced the languages spoken by the remaining 20% of the population in the region. For instance, almost 20-45% of the vocabulary in non-Sanskritic languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada is derived from Sanskrit. Sanskrit has also loaned hundreds

of words to S E Asian languages such as Malay and Thai. The Brāhmi script, which is the oldest known script in which Sanskrit was written, formed the basis of scripts used in many other languages such as Korean, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese and so on.



AUM in Different Scripts derived from Brahmi

Is Sanskrit a Dead Language? Although just a few thousand people can converse in Sanskrit and a few hundred thousand can read and write in it, Sanskrit cannot be considered a dead language such as Latin, which is the religious language of Roman

Catholics. For e.g., Latin is used only by Clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, whereas millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit hymns as a part of their daily worship. The important sacraments, such as wedding ceremonies, of most Hindus are still conducted with Sanskrit chants. Scholars still publish books, periodicals and articles in Sanskrit. A few news channels and other media programs use Sanskrit as their language medium. Organizations such as the Sanskrit Bharati[\[2\]](#) are trying to revive the use of Sanskrit as a spoken language. Sanskrit is still classified as one of the ‘official languages’ by the Government of India.

Why Learn Sanskrit? The advantages of learning Sanskrit for understanding Hindu Dharma are well stated by a scholar in the following words[\[3\]](#):

“...the difficulty in bringing Hinduism to the West and having a language such as English serve as the prime carrier of the tradition, is that it becomes all too easy to import foreign concepts of religion into the tradition. Especially Christian and Jewish, and to a certain extent even Islamic, concepts are built into words like God, soul, heaven, hell and sin. So if one translates *brahman* as God, *atman* as soul, *papa* as sin, *dharma* as religion, one imperceptibly changes Hinduism. This is because the Sanskrit word *brahman* is not the same as the English word, God, *atman* is not equivalent to soul, *papa* is not sin, and *dharma* is much more than religion. The only true way to understand these terms is through Sanskrit, which means reading and understanding the sacred texts of Hinduism in the original language, Sanskrit. But if no one is reading these texts and if no one is

teaching what these terms actually mean, it becomes inevitable that the Hinduism developing in the West is going to be reflected through the lens of Christianity, Judaism and Islam....”

Secondly, the use of Sanskrit in our worship is also advisable for the following reasons –

“The Sanskrit mantras used in religious rites and ceremonies have a special effect on the minds of those who hear them. This can be experienced by attending a religious ceremony where the Sanskrit mantras are properly recited by the priests who are specially trained to do so. The Sanskrit language has a musical, mystical, and meditative sound that is unmatched by any other language. The ancient sages revealed their truths in Sanskrit, so to use a different language would diminish the full meanings of the mantras.

The use of translations of the Sanskrit mantras into presently common languages during ceremonies are unable to produce the solemn and sacred atmosphere required for performing such holy acts...”[4]

The Sanskrit language is thus a window to Hindu culture, civilization, religion and philosophy. It is the duty of all Hindus to acquire at least a rudimentary knowledge of this beautiful and sacred language.

Tamil

In addition to Sanskrit, the second most important language that has made a very significant contribution to Hindu literature is Tamil, spoken in parts of southern India, northern and eastern Sri Lanka and amongst Tamil immigrants in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore outside the Indian subcontinent. Tamil has a literary tradition of over two thousand years. Hindu tradition

states that the rules of Sanskrit as well as Tamil grammar were both formulated by Lord Shiva, and the latter were subsequently written down by Sage Agastya in the work Tolkappiyam. Just as Sanskrit is called the ‘Language of Gods’, Tamil too is credited with a Divine origin and is said to have originated from Lord Shiva himself. Some of the earliest written inscriptions in the Indian subcontinent are found to be in ‘Tamil Brahmi’. Many Sanskrit manuscripts were written in the ‘Grantham’ script, which is a slightly modified version of the Tamil script.

The Tamil speaking areas were the home of the Vaishnavite Alvar and Shaivite Nayanmar saints who wrote thousands of exquisite devotional Hindu hymns. Their writings are often considered at par with the Vedas. This region of India is acknowledged as the origin of the Bhakti movement that

swept much of the Indian subcontinent in waves in the last 1400 years or so. Tamil devotional literature is sometimes considered the primary source in the composition of very popular Sanskrit scriptures such as the Shrimad Bhāgavata Purāṇa. Starting around 600 CE, the Shaivite saints Sambandhar, Appar and Sundarar and several other Nayanmar Saints wrote the 12 Thirumurais, the sacred Shaivite songs. The first 7 of these 12 are called the Thevarams and the 8th is called Thiruvachakam (and authored by Saint Manikkavacakar who lived in the 7th cent CE) and are especially considered sacred. The 12 Alvar (500-850 CE) Saints together composed 4000 songs collected in the ‘Divya-Prabandham’ collection. Within this collection, the 1000 songs of Saint Nammalvar are often considered the Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit Vedas.

Another beautiful scripture in Tamil is the Kural of Sage Thiruvalluvar, who was a weaver by profession. The Kural contains beautiful teachings on right conduct and virtues and is believed to have been written almost 2000 years ago.



Statue of Sage Thiruvalluvar in Kanyakumari (Source: Tripadvisor)

In the 12th century C.E., Tamil also produced the Kamba Ramayana, a beautiful rendering of Valmiki's Ramayana, and also the Periyapurānam which contains the biographies of the 63 Nayanmar saints. A century later, Srivilliputhur wrote the Tamil version of the Mahābhārata. In addition, there are numerous devotional works related to the Deities Shiva and Subrahmanya in the Tamil language from succeeding centuries.

The fusion of two sacred languages, Sanskrit and Tamil, produced the 'Maṇipravālā' language in which a lot of sacred literature of south Indian Vaishnava Hindus is written. In this language, the verbs are in Tamil but nouns and adjectives are Sanskrit words.

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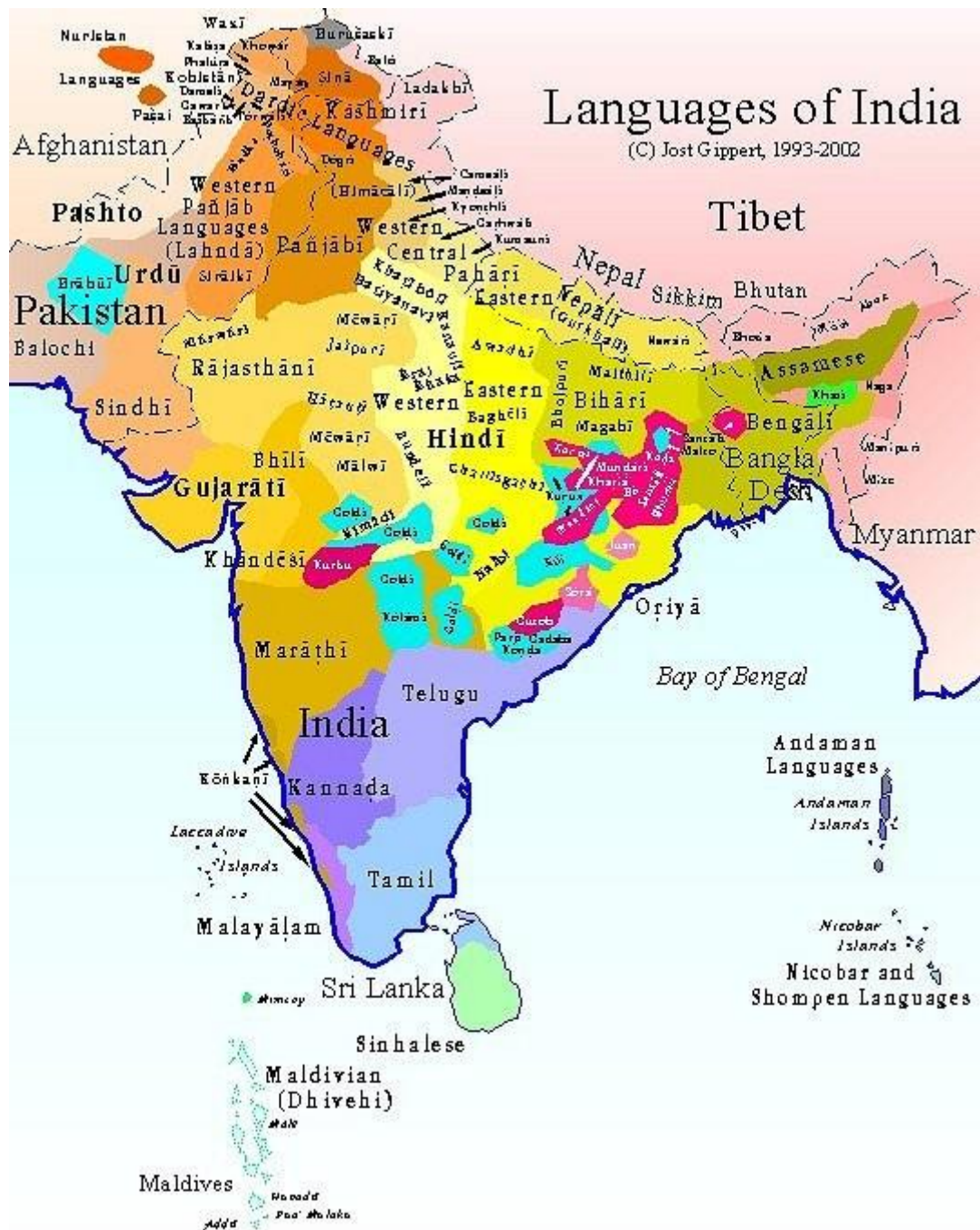
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Chapter11

Languages of Hindu Scriptures: Other Languages

In addition to Sanskrit and Tamil, many other Indian as well as non-Indian languages were used for composing Hindu scriptures. For e.g., we have a version of the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa in Javanese (an Indonesian language), versions of Ramayana in Thai, Burmese, Tibetan and other languages.

The map below shows the current distribution of various languages in India:



Hindi

The different dialects of Hindi evolved in the last 1000 years and constitute the most

commonly spoken language of Hindus today in northern India. The Bhakti saints adopted the use of Hindi dialects in a big way to explain the subtle concepts of Hindu religion to the masses in a simple manner. Many saints of the Nirguṇa Bhakti tradition, who worshipped Paramātmā as a Formless Divinity, used the ‘Santabhāshā’ – a mixture of several colloquial dialects of Hindi. The Guru Grantha Sahib (compiled originally around 1604 C.E.), the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, is also written predominantly in the Santabhāshā. Likewise, the beautiful hymns of Saint Kabir (15th century C.E.) are also in this form of Hindi. On the other hand, several Sagūṇa Bhakti saints chose the Braj dialect (spoken in the Mathura region of northern India) for their devotional literature. The best example of Bhakti poetry in Braj are the works of Saint Surdas (16-17th century C.E.). Saint Tulsidas (16-

17th cent C.E.) also chose an eastern dialect, the Awadhi, to write several of his celebrated works such as the Ramacharitmanas, considered a very important scripture by Hindus of north India. In the late 18th century, Khari Boli dialect spoken around Delhi and in western parts of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh became the standard Hindi for literary purposes. The Pandits of Varanasi and subsequent the Ārya Samāja movement (founded in 1875 CE) generated a lot of religious Hindu literature in the Khari Boli. In particular, the latter movement produced vast literature in Hindi in order to popularize the Vedas, Upanishads and other Vedic scriptures amongst the Hindi speaking peoples of northern India.

Marathi

The first translation of Bhagavadgita into another Indian language was the Jnāneshvari by Sant Jnaneshvar (13th century C.E.), written in an older form of Marathi. The commentary is known for the sweetness and simplicity of its language, and its ability to convey complex philosophical doctrines in a lucid manner. A few centuries later, Saint Ekanātha composed the Ekanātha Bhāgavata, a Marathi commentary on the 11th skandha of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, as well as work based on Ramayana named Bhāvārtha Ramayana. Several other popular scriptural works in Marathi such as the Dāsabodha were authored by renowned Hindu saints of Maharashtra, such Swami Samartha Ramadasa. The devotional songs of Saint Tukarama, called abhangas, are sung even today. Numerous other Marathi works based on the Itihasas and Puranas,

notably the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, have been composed in the last 6 centuries. In modern times, a vast literature in Marathi on Hindu religious themes has been written, and is probably greater in extent than the modern Hindi literature.

Javanese

Many Hindu scriptures were translated and adapted into the local languages of the regions outside of the Indian subcontinent in which Hindu Dharma spread in ancient times. As examples, we can point to Javanese translations of the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa.

Assamese

The valley of Brahmaputra in eastern India was called Prāgjyotisha and Kāmarūpa in ancient times and its evil ruler Narakasura was killed by Lord Krishna, who freed the

thousands of innocent women that the ruler had enslaved. The region has large populations of wild elephants and the Hastyāyurveda in the Sanskrit language attributed to Pālākāpya Muni is said to have been compiled there. In the 13th cent. CE, Hema Sarasvatī wrote a Prahlēda Charita in Assamese, and it is the first known literary work in that language. Two centuries later, Shankara Deva, considered the greatest Assamese Hindu saint, authored several works in Assamese such as 2400 verse summaries of various episodes from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. His works lead to the spread of Vaishnavism over large parts of Assam, and in parts of the Indian states of Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur. Portions of Mahabharata were also translated into Assamese by Rama Sarasvati.

Bengali

This is the second most widely spoken language in the Indian subcontinent and is prevalent in the Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura and in the country of Bangladesh. The region constituted the ancient Hindu regions of Anga, Varendra, Radheya, Shrihatta etc. The first known notable literature in Bengali were the Vaishnava songs of Chandidas, which even influenced the later great Bengali Hindu saints such as Chaitanya Mahāprabhu. He and his schools contributed a lot of devotional literature during the 15th cent CE and later, including works such as Chaitanya Bhāgavata by Brindavana Dāsa (16th cent CE) and Chaitanya Charitāmrita by Krishṇadāsa Kavirāja (16th cent CE). The Bengali rendering of Ramayana by Kṛttibāsa (15th cent CE) and Mahabharata by Kashiramdas (17th cent CE) are well known. The Baul mystics have also composed a lot

of spiritual poetry in Bengali, much of which has been transmitted only through oral traditions. In the 19th cent CE the disciples of Shri Ramakrishna Pramahansa authored notable works such as Kathāmrita which are read with great devotion by the followers of the Ramakrishna Mission – a neo Hindu tradition started by his disciple Swami Vivekananda.

Gujarati

The most notable religious composer in the language is Narsi Mehta (16th cent CE) and his devotional lyrics called Prabhātiyas are sung reverentially at morning by numerous Hindus in the Indian state of Gujarat. His bhajan ‘Vaishnava jana to tene kahiye’ was Mahatma Gandhi’s favorite bhajan and was sung during his prayer meetings. Poetess Saint Meerabai lived for several years in Gujarat and she too composed some of her

devotional hymns in the language. Religious literature in Gujarati got a further impetus by the founding of the Swaminarayan Samprādāya about 2 centuries ago, and that Vaishnava Hindu movement has today spread all over the world with the Gujarati diaspora.

Malayalam

This language is spoken in the Indian state of Kerala and separated from the parent Tamil language only around 1000 CE. Rāmacharitam based on the Yuddha Kāṇḍa of Ramayana is considered the oldest literary work in Malayalam. This was followed by Malayalam renderings of the Adhyātma Ramayana, Bhāgavata Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata by Tunjattu Ramanujan Ezhuthacchan. Other than the numerous other Malayalam works based on these Hindu scriptures, the Vaidika

Namputiri Brāhmaṇas of Kerala have also written numerous practical manuals in their mother tongue to assist them in the minutiae of Vedic religious ceremonies.

Kannada

Spoken over large parts of the Indian state of Karnataka, it is said to be the second oldest Dravidian language spoken today. The first literature in Kannada pertains to Jainism, but one of the authors named Pampa also composed Kannada works *Vikramārjuna-Vijaya* and *Sāhasa Bhīmavijaya* based on the *Mahābhārata*. The Virashaiva school of Shaivite Hindus started by Basavanna contributed a lot of devotional literature in Kannada. His 700 ‘vachanas’ as well as those of Mahadevi Akka, a Saint Poetess of the tradition are masterpieces in the language. Bhīmakavi’s (14th cent CE) *Bāsavapurāṇa* is a famous Kannada

biography of Basavanna. Likewise, the Kannada version of the Mahabharata, as well as another work ‘Jaimini Ashvamedha’ based on King Yudhishthira’s Ashvamedha ceremony by Naranappa (15th cent CE) and Lakshmīsha (16th cent CE) are considered very good specimens of Kannada religious poetry. In the 15th – 16th cent CE, the famous Dvaita Vedāntin Purandara Dāsa is considered the founder of the Carnatic school of Hindu music and contributed beautiful Vaishnava poetry. Saint Kanakadāsa, who lived around the same time, also wrote Vaishnava works Haribhaktisāra and Mohanataranginī.

Telugu

The first work in Telugu is the Telugu rendering of Mahābhārata in parts by Nannai (11th cent CE), Tikkanna (13th cent CE) and Errapragada. Soon thereafter,

Poetess Molla composed a Telugu rendering of the Ramayana. In the 14th-15th cent CE, Shrinātha wrote several Telugu works such as translations of the Sanskrit Bhīmeshvara Purāṇa, the Kāshikhaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa, a work called Haravilasamu containing the sacred narratives associated with Lord Shiva, and a compendium of the sacred rites and holy places in the Telugu speaking lands. A very popular Telugu work is the Telugu rendering of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa of Saint Poet Pottanna (14th – 15th cent CE). Around the same time, saint Annamacharya composed exquisite devotional poetry extolling Lord Venkateshvara. In the 16th century, five works, considered as Mahākāvyas, were authored in the Telugu language – Manucharita of Allasani Peddanna (based on the story of Svārochisha Manu in the Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa); Amuktamālyadeva of

King Krishnadevaraya (dealing with the story of Alvar Saintess Andal and her father Perialvar); Vasucharita by Bhattu Murti; Panduranga Mahatmyamu of Tenali Ramalinga and Raghava Pandiyamu of Pingala Suranna. The last work is remarkable in that each verse unfolds the Ramayana as well as Mahābhārata. In the 17th cent CE, Saint Bhadrāchala Rāmadāsa and in the 18th – 19th cent CE, Saint Tyāgarāja composed mesmerizing Telugu devotional songs in praise of Lord Rama and these are sung by millions of Indians in south India to this day.

Oriya

The earliest work in this language spoken in the Indian state of Orissa is the Kalasa Chautisa of Vatsadāsa (14th cent CE), describing the wedding of Lord Shiva and Parvati. In the next cent., we have the

Chandi Purāṇa, which extols Devi Durga. The author, Sāralādāsa, also condensed the Sanskrit Mahābhārata into 700 verses in Oriya. His Vilanka Ramayana in Oriya depicts Devi Sita as the actual killer of Ravana. In the 16th-17th cent CE, the Oriya poet Jagannāthadāsa wrote the Bhāgavata in a very elegant and lucid poetical style. Several other Oriya devotional works were written around the same time, such as the adaptation of Jayadeva's Gīta-Govinda.

English

Many Hindu saints in modern times have chosen the medium of English because of its current popularity as a global language of communication. The writings of such great Hindus are often considered sacred by many Hindus, and are acquiring the status of scripture. Examples of such saints who wrote in English are Sri Aurobindo, Swami

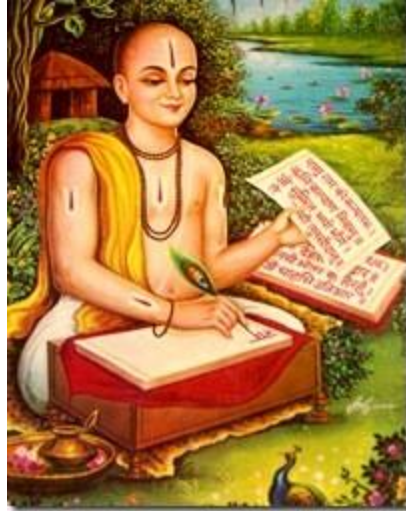
Vivekananda and Satguru Shivaya Subrahmanya Swami. English is also rapidly becoming the language through which many modern Hindus acquire knowledge of Hindu Dharma, because most of the important Hindu scriptures are now easily available in English translations.

Should we study our Shāstras only in Sanskrit?

Some people believe that scriptures should be studied only in their original language, from a master who knows that language and the scripture thoroughly. It is of course always preferable to read any book in its original language to understand it completely, but selfish people often use this fact to acquire a monopoly over teaching the scriptures to the common man. When the Bible was first translated from Latin to another language, it caused a stir in the

Christian clergy, and the Pope threatened Martin Luther (the translator) with dire consequences. In India, the Koran was not translated from Arabic till just a few centuries back. Likewise, when Sant Tulsidas translated Valmiki's Ramayana from Sanskrit to the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, the orthodox Pandits opposed him. They believed that it was blasphemy and a sacrilege to translate Hindu scriptures from Sanskrit, the Divine language, into a human language. However, for more than 1500 years, Hindu Sants have been teaching our holy books to the masses in their own language out of compassion, and because they believed that language should not be a barrier in the common man learning the beautiful teachings of these holy books.

Story: Bhagavān Shiva asks Sant Tulsidas to explain the Scriptures in a Language that the Common Man Understands



Sant Tulsi Das is considered an incarnation of Sage Valmiki in our modern times.

Tulsidas noted that India at that time was ruled by foreign Muslim rulers who were very harsh on the Hindus. All of our major temples had been demolished by them. Our scriptures were being burned. People were being forcibly asked to give up their religion and become Muslims. And our priests, the Brāhmaṇas, were being tortured. The government officials often troubled the common man by extracting very heavy taxes. Therefore, Tulsidas thought that he should teach the Ramayana to everyone,

because it describes the life story of Lord Rama, who was an ideal ruler, an ideal son and much more. But the Ramayana which was written by Sage Valmiki was a very large book. It had 24000 verses. Moreover, it was in the Sanskrit language, which the common man did not understand those days.

So he first thought of shortening the Ramayana and create a version of it in Sanskrit with fewer verses. Every day, he wrote some verses in Sanskrit on a piece of paper. These verses described some part of the life of Lord Rama. But the next morning, Tulsidas saw that the sheet of paper on which he wrote the verses had become blank! This happened several days in a row. Then one night, Lord Shiva appeared to him in a dream and said to him – “Tulsidas, do not write the Ramayana again in Sanskrit, because only scholars can understand this language these days. I want you to go to

Ayodhya, where Lord Rama lived. There you should write your Ramayana in the language Awadhi, which the common people speak in that city.”

Tulsidas understood the command of Lord Shiva and proceeded to Ayodhya. He started composing his Ramayana in Awadhi, and called this version the ‘Ramacharitmanas’, which means – “The Holy Manasarovar Lake of the acts of Rama.” Tulsidas then started teaching the Ramacharitmanas to people in Varanasi. The book was so beautiful, musical and gave just such a wonderful description of the life of Lord Rama that soon, large crowds started attending his lectures.



For the first time, they could understand the beautiful life of Lord Rama, because the Ramacharitmanas was in Awadhi, a type of the Hindi language which was spoken by the common man. This caused some jealousy amongst the other local Pundits. They complained that Hindu scriptures should only be written in Sanskrit and not in any other language. They objected to the fact that Tulsidas worshipped Lord Shiva sometimes and yet he wrote his scripture on

the life of Lord Rama. How could he be loyal to two Devatas at the same time?

The Pundits forgot that all these Devatas are the different forms of the same God. To test Tulsidas, they asked him to place his manuscript of the Ramacharitmanas inside the Kashi Vishvanath Temple, the holiest Shiva Mandir in Varanasi. On top of this book, they placed copies of the four Vedas and then shut the doors of the Mandir. When the doors were opened the next morning, a miracle had happened. The Ramacharitmanas copy was now on the top, and ‘Satyam Shivam Sundaram’ was written on its front cover. This meant that Lord Shiva Himself had decided that Tulsi’s Ramacharitmanas was as holy as the Vedas, which are themselves holiest scriptures of Hinduism.

The Pundits felt really ashamed and they asked the Saint for forgiveness. Thereafter, he was allowed to give lectures on the Ramacharitmanas without any trouble. Many people made copies of the book and they started singing it in every village. Tulsidas-ji wrote his Ramacharitmanas in the language of the common people, and not in Sanskrit. But Lord Shiva decided that it was as sacred as the holy Vedas in Sanskrit. Therefore another message from the life of Tulsidas is that even though Sanskrit is the holy language for us Hindus, God will listen to our prayers no matter which language we use to worship him. The important thing to keep in mind is that we should remember God with faith and devotion, no matter what the language of our prayers is.

Chapter 12

Region-Wise Distribution of Hindu Sages, Saints, Scriptures, Languages and Holy Places

#	REGION	SAINTS, MUNIS, RISHIS, ACHARYAS	SCRIPTURES	LANGUAGES USED	HOLY PLACES
1	Kashmir (India and Pakistan)	Lalleshvari, Patanjali, Rishi Kashyapa	Lalla-Vaakyaani, scriptures of Kashmir Shaivism, Yoga Vasishtha, several Pancharatra Samhitas and Shaiva Agamas, Bhringeesha Samhita, Nilamata Purana	Sanskrit, Kashmiri	Amarnath, Sharadi (in POK), Hari Parbat (in Shrinagar), Khir Bhawani, Varahamula (Baramulla), Martand sun temple in Anantanag
2	Punjab (India and Pakistan)	Some Vedic Rishis, Namadev, Sikh Gurus, Swami Ramatirtha, Swami Virajananda	Some Vedic scriptures, Vishnudharma Purana, Vishnudharmottara Purana, Shivadharma Purana, Samba Purana, Guru Granth Sahib	Sanskrit, Sant Bhasha	Katasraj (Pakistan), Chintapurni, Amritsar, Multan (Pakistan), Jalandhar
3	North Western Frontier Province (Pakistan)	Some Vedic Rishis, Panini, Vaishampayana, Charaka	Ashtadhyayi, Ayurvedic texts like Charaka Samhita and Bhela Samhita	Sanskrit	Pushkalavati (Peshawar)
4	Afghanistan	Some Vedic Rishis	Vyomavati on Vaisheshika	Sanskrit	Ashamai temple close

			Prashastapadabhashya	Persian	to Kabul
			Hikayat of Nand Lal Goya (Sikhism)	(Hikayat only)	
5	Jammu (India)	Some Vedic Rishis, Banda Bairagi	Vasuki Purana	Sanskrit	Vaishno Devi, Naga temple in Bhaderwah
6	Sindh (Pakistan)	Some Vedic Rishis, Jhulelal, Sadhna, Devachandra	Devala Smriti, Karavira Mahatmya	Sanskrit	Las Bela, Karavira (Sukkur), Indus river
7	Rajasthan (India)	Some Vedic Rishis, Mirabai, Dhanna, Rampir, Pipa, Dadu, Guru Jambheshwar	Sabrangi, other Bhakti works	Hindi dialects	Pushkar, Mt. Abu, Nathdwara
8	Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh (India)	Most Vedic Rishis, Gaudapadacharya, Surdas, Ghasidas	Most Vedic Scriptures	Sanskrit, Braj	Mathura, Vrindavana, Kurukshetra, Pehowa, Garhmukteshwar, Yamuna River, Sarasvati River, Ganga River
9	Gujarat (India)	Narsi Mehta, Jalaram Bapa, Prannath, Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi, Sant Morari Bapu	Naagara Khanda of Skanda Mahapurana	Sanskrit	Dwaraka, Somanath, Dakor, Prabhasa, Palitana, Modhera, Narmada river
10	Maharashtra (India)	Tukaram, Samartha Ramadasa, Jnaneshvara, Janabai, Namadev, Ekanath	Jnaneshvari, Dasabodh, Abhangs of Tukaram	Sanskrit, Maharashtri, Marathi	Nashik, Trayambakeshwar, Ramtek, Bhimashankar, Paithan, Alandi, Pandharpur, Jejuri, Godavari river
11	Karnataka (India)	Akka Mahadevi, Basavanna, Madhvacharya, Purandaradas, Kanakadas	Basava Purana, Vachanas, Panchadashi and other works of Vidyaranya Swami etc.	Sanskrit, Kannada	Udipi, Shringeri, Kaveri river, Shravanabelagola, Gokarna

12	Kerala (India)	Shankaracharya, Narayana Guru, Swami Chinmayananda, Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi)	Narayaneeyam	Sanskrit, English, Malayalam	Thiruvananthapuram, Guruvayoor, Sabrimala
13	Tamil Nadu (India)	Thiruvalluvar, Ramanujacharya, Alvars, Nayanmars, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar, Kamban, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Shivananda, Paramacharya Chandrashekharendra Saraswati (Kanchi Shankaracharya), Sri Sri Ravishankar	Kural, Divyaprabandhams, Periya Puranam, works of Shrivaisnava saints, Advaita Vedantins etc., songs of Tyagararaja etc., Kamba Ramayana	Tamil, Sanskrit, Manipravala	Kanchi, Madurai, Rameshvaram, Tiruchi, Kanyakumari, Chidambaram, Thanjavur, Kumbhakonam, Kaveri river
14	Andhra Pradesh (India)	Vallabhacharya, Ramanandacharya, Potana, Bhadrachalam Ramdas	Works of Vallabhacharya, translations of Puranas into Telugu	Sanskrit, Telugu	Tirupati, Srisailam, Kalahasti, Bhadrachalam, Godavari river
15	Orissa (India)	Jaidev, Atibadi Jagannatha Das, Bhima Boi, Abhirama Paramahansa	Agni Purana, Gita Govinda, Kapila Purana, portions of Brahma Purana	Sanskrit	Jagannath Puri, Ekamra
16	Chattisgarh (India)	Dharma Das (Kabirpanthi), Guru Ghasidas (Satnami), Sant Parshuram (Ramanami)	Guru Mahatmya of Dharma Das, writings of Ramnami, Satnami and Kabirpanthi sampradayas	Hindi	
17	Madhya Pradesh (India)	Govindapadacharya, Vindhyavasin (Samkhya teacher), Angad Singh, Sri Singaji, Sena	Matsya Purana, Reva Khanda and Sahyadri Khanda of Skanda Mahapurana	Sanskrit	Ujjain, Chitrakut, Omkareshwar, Amarkantak, Narmada River
18	W Bengal (India)	Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Ramakrishna	Kalki Upapurana, Devi Purana, Ramayana of	Sanskrit	Navadvip, Mayapur, Gangasagar, Ganga

		Paramahansa, Vivekanand, Krttibasa, Matsyendranatha, Sri Aurobindo	Krttibasa		river
19	Bangladesh	Ma Anandamoyi, Lokenath Brahmachari, Madhusudana Saraswati, Haridas Thakur	Kriyayogasara Upapurana, Mahabhaagavata Upapurana	Sanskrit	Shrihatta (Sylhet), Tripura (Tipperah), Jessore
20	Assam (India)	Shankara Deva, Madhabdeva, Palakapya Muni	Kaalikaa Upapurana, works of Shankara Deva and his disciples (e.g., translation of Bhagavata Purana)	Sanskrit Assamese	Kamakhya
21	Jharkhand (India)		—	—	Baba Baidyanath temple in Deoghar, Parasnatha (Jain)
22	Bihar (India)	Yajnavalkya, several Jain Tirthankaras, Buddha, Mandana Mishra, Vachaspati Mishra, scholars of Navya Nyaya school of philosophy, Vidyapati	Portions of Shatapath Brahmana and Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Garuda Purana, works of Navya Nyaya	Sanskrit	Gaya, Pavapuri (Jain)
23	Eastern Uttar Pradesh (India)	Ramanandacharya, Tulsidas, Kabirdas, Ravidas	Some Vedic scriptures, Ramacharitmanas, Bijak	Sanskrit, Awadhi	Varanasi, Allahabad (Prayag), Gorakhpur, Ayodhya
24	Nepal	Buddha, Gorakhanatha,	Vaishvanara Purana, Swayambhu Purana, Nepal Mahatmya of Skanda Purana	Sanskrit, Nepali	Pashupatinath, Lumbini (Buddhist), Shalagrama
25	Manipur (India)	—	Manipura Purana	Sanskrit, Meitei	
26	Himachal Pradesh and	Maandavya Rishi, Vasishtha Rishi, Swami	Vedanta Sutras	Sanskrit	Haridwar, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Naina Devi,

	Uttaranchal (India)	Rama			Jwala Devi, Gangotri, Jamnotri, Rudraprayag, Uttarkashi, Ganga river, Yamuna river, Badarika Ashrama
27	Java and Bali (Indonesia)		Javanese Brahmanda Purana, Ganapati Tattva, Brihaspati Tattva etc.	Sansirit and Javanese	Prambanan (Shiva Temple), Baisak in Bali
28	Arunachal Pradesh (India)	–	–	–	Parashuram Tirtha
29	Tibet (China)	–	–	–	Manasarovar and Mt Kailash
30	Baluchistan (Pakistan)	–	–	–	Hinglaj Mata, Kali Mandir at Kalat
31	Sri Lanka	Some Nayayanars, Arumuga Navalar, Siva Yogaswami	Some Shaiva Siddhanta literature	Sanskrit, Tamil	Kataragama, Nallur Kandaswamy temple
32	Kampuchea	–	–	–	Angkor Wat
33	Mauritius		–	–	13 th Jyotirlinga
34	United States of America	Paramahamsa Yogananda (migrated from India), Satguru SivayaSubramaniaswami	Works of Hindu teachers based in the United States	English	Several prominent Hindu temples in various cities

Chapter - 13

Bhagavad Gita – The Name of the Scripture



The title of this beloved Hindu scripture literally means “The Divine Song” or the “The Song of the Lord”. This holy book of Hindus presents an eternally relevant dialogue between a human representative (Arjuna) and the Supreme Being (as Krishna). The Bhagavad Gita is often

referred to simply as the ‘Gita’ in short. Many other Gitas exist in the Hindu scriptural tradition, but when the word ‘Gita’ is used, it denotes our Bhagavad Gita, because of its pre-eminence over all the other Hindu Gita scriptures.

Importance of the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita has been considered one of the most important scriptures of Hindus for over 2000 years. The name of this Hindu scripture means the Divine Song, or Song of the Lord, or Sung by God because it is a dialog between God (in the form of Lord Krishna) and human beings (represented by Arjuna). The scripture is referred to as ‘Gita’ in short. The scripture is almost universally regarded by Hindus as the epitome of all the spiritual teachings of the Vedas and the Upanishads and is read by millions of Hindus for inspiration and solace to this day.

Many Hindus memorize all of its 700 verses, or at least selected chapters and verses to draw upon their teachings and to teach others. Hindu tradition says that the verses of Krishna are recorded exactly as they were uttered by Him. Arjuna's speech was in prose, and it was versified later by Rishi Veda Vyāsa.

How ancient is the Bhagavad Gita?

The Gita is said to have been revealed to humanity around 3100 BCE. Some historians date it to 1400 BCE, whereas others think of 500 BCE. Many other scholars give it a date of around 100BCE to 100 AD in its present form. The tree under which Krishna revealed the Gita to Arjuna still exists in Kurukshetra in Northern India, and is an object of worship.

Gita and Other Scriptures

The Bhagavad Gita is a part of the much larger scripture – the Mahabharata. It forms chapters 23-40 in the Bhishma Parvan – the 6th of the 18 books of the Mahabharata. The Gita has 700 verses in the standard version (taken to be the version on which Adi Shankaracharya wrote his commentary) but there are traditions to the effect that the scripture had 745 verses. Some manuscripts from Kashmir and NW India have 14 or so additional verses, and some commentators have also noted some extra verses. But none of these additional verses add anything significant to the teaching of the Gita. In the standard version of 700 verses, 574 are spoken by Lord Krishna, 84 by Arjuna, 41 by Sanjaya and 1 by King Dhritrashtra. The Gita has 18 chapters which have different titles. However, different commentators and different manuscripts either sometimes omit these titles or give different titles for the

same chapter. This is taken to mean that the addition of titles to these chapters took place at a later time, and that the chapters did not have names originally. Moreover, these titles often do not necessarily reflect the actual contents of these chapters faithfully.

The Gita has been so highly esteemed since ancient times that dozens of slightly different adaptations were composed in imitation of the original and incorporated into different scriptures. For example, the Ganesha Gita occurs in the Ganesha Purana, the Ishwara Gita in the Kurma Purana, the Devi Gita in the Markandeya Purana and the Brahma Gita in the Suta Samhita of the Skanda Purana. Within the Mahabharata itself is included the AnuGita, in which Shri Krishna summarizes and restates some portions of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna upon the latter's request. In addition, the Bhāgavata Purana (11th book) has a Gita

called the ‘Uddhava Gita’, which was narrated by Lord Krishna as his last sermon to His son Uddhava. A fourth Gita of Shri Krishna titled the Uttaragita also exists and it has a commentary attributed to Gaudapacharya, the teacher’s teacher of Adi Shankaracharya. But it is the Bhagavad Gita that is the most popular Gita, and it is even claimed that studying it makes the study of other scriptures unnecessary.

Translations and Commentaries

The Gita is the second most translated scripture in the world, after the Bible. The oldest surviving translation of the Gita is in Javanese, an Indonesian language. This translation covers less than 100 verses and is more than 1000 years old. Literally dozens of Hindu scholars and saints wrote their own commentaries and explanations on the Bhagavad Gita in the last 1500 years or

more. The oldest commentary that survives is that of Adi Shankaracharya (~700 AD) and tries to show that the scripture teaches Advaita Vedanta. However, it is clear from this commentary that there existed several ancient commentaries on the Gita but none of these has survived today. He is closely followed in time by Bhatta Bhaskara who interprets the Gita according to the school of Bhedabheda Vedanta. Other prominent Sanskrit commentaries on the Gita are by Ramanujacharya (following Vishishtadvaita Vedanta), Madhvacharya (following Dvaita Vedanta), Vedanta Deshika (super-commentary on Ramanujacharya's commentary), Shridhara Swami (following Advaita Vedanta with a strong flavor of Bhakti) and Madhusudana Saraswati (Advaita Vedanta with a strong flavor of Bhakti). Around the beginning of the 13th cent. AD, Sant Jnaneshvara of Maharashtra

wrote a beautiful verse commentary on the Gita in an olden form of the Marathi language. In our own times, Mahatma Gandhi wrote an explanation on the Gita. Literally hundreds of translations and beautiful commentaries on the Gita in English, Hindi and many other languages have appeared since 1750 AD. Because of its importance in Hinduism, every important Hindu thinker and philosopher feels the need to write a commentary on this scripture from his or her own perspective.

The Teachings of Bhagavad Gita

Hindu Dharma prescribes four legitimate goals of our human existence Artha (material wealth, security); Kāma (fulfilling desires that make our senses and mind happy, sensual and aesthetic pleasures; success); Dharma (virtue, doing one's duty, piety) and Moksha (liberation from the

continuous cycle of births and deaths through spiritual enlightenment). In this tetrad, Dharma plays a pivotal role because it is one must pursue Artha and Kāma if they violate the requirements of Dharma, and also because Dharma provides the edifice on which the edifice of spiritual enlightenment leading to Moksha is constructed.

There are two ways in which Dharma can be practiced. The first is that in which leading virtuous lives prevents us from Adharma (or evil), helps us accumulate good Karma and ensures that we are born into higher and more privileged life-forms during our successive rebirths. This way is called Pravritti Dharma' – or Dharma that leads us back to the cycle of births and deaths (even though we may advance successively in the hierarchy of living creatures). The second way of practicing Dharma is one in which the person's focus is to escape the cycle of

births and deaths altogether, and not merely advancing in the hierarchy of living creatures in successive births. This is called ‘Nivritti Dharma’, or Dharma that takes us out of this cycle of births and deaths completely. In other words, Nivritti Dharma is practicing Dharma in a manner that assists us in attaining Moksha.

The Gita is primarily a Moksha-Shastra, or a scripture which teaches us how we can practice Dharma so as to overcome the continuous cycle of births and deaths and become one with Brahman, the Supreme Being. The Gita teaches us how to live our lives ethically and spiritually. It describes the different paths to spiritual enlightenment, the correct attitude and world-view that we should have at all times while engrossed in our day to day tasks, and the nature of the final goal – the state of Moksha.



The four main paths to Moksha taught by the Gita are Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Dhyana Yoga. These paths are not mutually exclusive and we should combine elements from all, even while focusing on 1 or 2 of them. The Gita recognizes the fact that different people have different abilities and temperaments and therefore they may prefer focusing on 1 of the 4 approaches.

The path of Jnana Yoga teaches that our soul is the real ‘us’ and it is different from the body. Therefore, we should not get things that pertain to the body, which dies and perishes when we die. The soul survives our death and moves from 1 body to another till we achieve Moksha. When we understand our nature as the spiritual soul and not as the body, we will start focusing more on the really important and spiritual things, and will desist from focusing our efforts and attention towards the things of this physical world. This knowledge and understanding leads us to Moksha.

The path of Karma Yoga states that all the sensations of our sense organs – such as pain, happiness, sorrow, heat, cold etc., are temporary. Nothing lasts forever. Therefore, we should bear them with patience, and not get infatuated with negative emotions, nor should we get attracted by worldly

temptations. Instead, we should continue to do our duty at all times just because it ought to be done, and without any desire of fruits resulting from doing them.

The path of Bhakti Yoga is said to be the easiest path, accessible to all irrespective of our educational background, social status or gender. It implies loving devotion to God through worship, and doing all our duties with faith in Him and with a sense of surrender to His will.

The path of Dhyana Yoga teaches that we should not focus all our attention on the external world, because the Supreme Truth and Reality, which is our soul and God, are right within us. Therefore, we should meditate on God, and should not waste our time in pursuing things that hamper meditation, such as strong emotions, strong likes and dislikes etc.

It can be seen very easily that people with different temperaments will focus on 1 or the other paths above. For example, emotional people would prefer the path of Bhakti, introverts and self-reflective people will prefer Dhyana Yoga, intellectuals will prefer Jnana Yoga and action oriented people will prefer Karma Yoga. However, there is no one who does not have some portion of intellectualism, emotion, self-reflection and action aspects in his behavior.

The Bhagavad Gita therefore describes these four paths but also teaches them in a way that spiritual aspirants will follow elements of all these paths even when focusing on one of them. For example, a Karma Yogin will benefit from practicing Dhyana Yoga because it will help him bring his senses under the discipline of his pure mind. He will understand the temporary nature of the physical sensations better if he understands

the path of Jnana Yoga to learn about the true nature of our body, our soul, God and this universe. And devoting the fruits of his Karma to God will help him give up the desire for these fruits. Similarly, the follower of Jnana Yoga will give a practical bent to his understanding of the nature of the soul and the body if he actually experiences through Dhyana Yoga. He will not lapse into evil ways if he continues to do his duty towards others (Karma Yoga). And finally, he will not get enamored of dry intellectualism alone if he combines his philosophical and theological insights with devotion and faith in God.

The Gita strongly emphasizes the need to follow the path of Dharma as taught in our scriptures, and continue doing all our required duties throughout our lives.

Towards the end of the Gita, Lord Krishna assures us that as long as we continue to do

our duties without desire for fruits, as an offering for Him and remembering Him, He will save us from all evil and also grant us Moksha.

Here and there, the Gita has beautiful gems that have become a part of general Hindu repertoire and are recalled by us with great faith, piety and devotion. For example, in Chapter 4, Lord Krishna states how God incarnates on earth to protect Dharma whenever it is in danger of being overwhelmed by Adharma. In Chapter II, he says that just as the body passes through the phases of childhood, youth and old age followed by death, the soul passes from one body to another in its different lives. The soul is never born, it never dies, it is unchangeable and eternal. It cannot be cleaved by weapons, wetted by water and so on. Lord Krishna also teaches us to practice moderation, or seek a balance in our lives

while performing our Karma or duties. We should all aspire to become knowledgeable and wise because true knowledge and understanding alone cuts ignorance like a sword. While describing the beautiful doctrine of Bhakti in chapter 8, He says that he accepts the offerings of whosoever offers even water or a leaf to God as long as it is done with faith and devotion. In chapter 16, the Gita condemns superficiality of behavior and asks us to be pure within ourselves, and to combine simple living with high thinking, with faith in God and with a virtuous character. In chapter 18, Lord Krishna recognizes the fact that every action, even if good and done with pure intentions, can lead to a negative result just as fire and light are surrounded by smoke. But this must not deter us from performing our duties required of us. We must, at all times, perform our duties because all activities have a role to

play in maintaining stability of our society and the universe.

Contemporary Relevance of the Gita

Question: The Bhagavad Gita is merely a historical document recording the supposed dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Then why should we study it today? What is the proof that the dialogue was intended as an eternal and a universal scripture that should be studied in our times by us?

Answer: The Bhagavad Gita is not merely a ‘historical’ document that should be read only to study history, or to appreciate only its literary worth without paying attention to its actual ethical and spiritual teachings. There are several reasons to regard the Gita as an eternally relevant scripture that provides us with guidance on Moksha and Dharma.

Even a cursory perusal of the contents of Gita reveals that it seeks to answer the eternal questions of life, even though it is placed within a specific situational context of the Mahabharata. This simple consideration should be sufficient to show that the characterization of the Gita merely as a historical or a literary document reflect a pedantic and an intellectually dishonest and shallow viewpoint.[\[1\]](#)

Second, the Bhagavad Gita itself points to its eternal relevance. The scripture is indeed intended to provide guidance on questions of life for all times to come. For example, when Sanjaya completes his narration of the Gita with the following words: “Wherever there.....” Even the opening words – ‘dharmakshetre kurukshetre...’ hint that the dialogue that follows them deals with perennial issues of conflict between evil and

virtue, between darkness and spiritual enlightenment.

The Mahabharata, of which the Gita is an integral part, is not merely a war epic. Embedded within it are dozens of sections of a didactic nature. A careful consideration of the structure of the epic will reveal that it intentionally embeds these didactic sections within other mundane interesting narratives so that the reader does not get bored with just long sermons one after the other. Embedding parables, sermons, proverbs and spiritual treatises within the overall context of the story of the Mahabharata also enables the reader to see the practical implications and applications of these edifying teachings. The same can be said of the Gita as well. The Gita is placed within a particularly challenging situation within the Mahabharata where Arjuna, one of its main characters, is faced with numerous moral

dilemmas that cripple and drain him physically and mentally. Very often, we find ourselves in similar situations, and incorrect decisions taken at these junctures can lead us to complete ruin. In response, Lord Krishna then provides Arjuna with spiritual solutions that can fit almost any context in our own lives.

Later Hindu scriptures also state the importance of the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. For example, the Padma Mahāpurāṇa ...Numerous adaptations and imitations of the Gita are found in several other Hindu scriptures. E.g., the Ishvara Gita in the Kūrma Purāṇa, the Ganesh Gita in the Ganesh Purāṇa and so on. This too suggests the immense and continued popularity of the Gita as a scripture that teaches eternally relevant doctrines and principles.

If the Gita were merely a historical record with no eternal relevance, dozens of great Hindu philosophers and scholars would not have labored in writing commentaries on it over the last several centuries. Obviously, they saw the importance of its teachings and their relevance and therefore tried to explain it to lay Hindus by writing their massive scholarly commentaries and glosses on this scripture.

Many noteworthy Hindus as well as non-Hindus have found solutions to their problems through the Gita. For example, Mahatma Gandhi once wrote – *“I have had no less share of great tragedies in my life. But whenever I am in trouble, I rush to Mother Gita as a child, and find a verse or a phrase here or there, that provides an answer to my problem, and gives me great comfort (paraphrased).”*

There are very few verses in the Gita that are specific to the exact historical context of the Mahabharata war, which seems to be a literary muse to expound eternal Hindu teachings. The scripture predominantly deals with eternal questions that plague our minds and conscience, and provides numerous complementary and supplementary solutions in keeping with the complexity and diversity of our individual lives.

In conclusion, restricting our appreciation of the Gita to its historical and literary aspects alone can be misleading and deprives us of its true worth. The Gita provides answers to our moral dilemmas and gives hope to the hopeless, to the helpless and the needy by exhorting us to be strong, have faith in God, and have a deep commitment to performance of our duties. We must never give up and continue to take small steps

towards our goals, while never forgetting God.

The Bhagavad Gita – A Summary

Arjuna said to Lord Krishna:

*Overcome by faint-heartedness (a sinking feeling), confused about my duty (Dharma), I ask you: Please tell me that which is truly better for me. I am your student. Please teach me, who has taken refuge in you. **Gita** 2.7*

The Blessed Lord Krishna replied:

[GOD IS THE SUPREME BEING]

I am the final Destination (Goal), the Provider, the Master of all, the Witness of everything, the Abode (in which the whole universe resides), worth seeking shelter of, and the Friend of all. And I am the origin and the Dissolution, the Foundation of

*everything, the Resting Place and the immortal cause of everything. **Gita 9.18***



[OUR TRUE NATURE IS DIVINE]

*An eternal portion of My own Self becomes the soul of creatures in the world of living things. It attracts the five senses and the mind as the sixth (which lords over these senses) – all these six are comprised of non-living matter. **Gita 15.7***

[SEE THE DIVINE IN ALL CREATURES]

*The wise see the same (Brahman) with an equal eye, in a learned and humble brāhmaṇa, in a cow, in an elephant, in a dog, and even in a dog eater (outcast). **Gita 5.18***

[WE ARE THE ETERNAL SOUL, NOT THIS PERISHABLE BODY]

*The soul is never born and it does not ever die. The soul is not something that exists at one time and then vanishes the next. The soul is not something that did not exist at one time and then took birth and came into being subsequently. It is unchanging, eternal and primeval and it is not destroyed when the body is destroyed. **Gita 2.20***

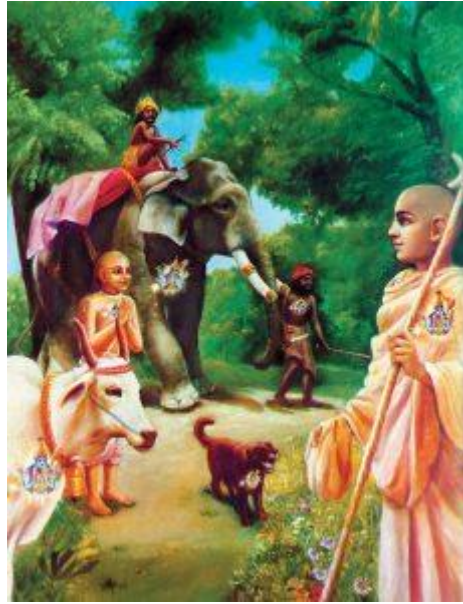
*Weapons cannot cleave the soul, fire cannot burn it. Water does not wet (or drown) it not does wind dry it. **Gita 2.23***

[DOCTRINE OF REBIRTH – WE NEVER DIE]

*Just as a human casts off worn out clothing and puts on new, the soul too casts off old bodies and enters into new ones. **Gita 2.22***

*Just as the soul dwelling in the body passes through childhood, youth and old age; in a similar manner, it travels from one body to another. Therefore, the wise do not get deluded over these changes. **Gita 2.13***

*When the soul enters a body, it becomes the master of that body. And when it leaves the body (at death), it takes the mind and senses along with it, just as the wind takes fragrances from their sources (the flowers). **Gita 15.8***



[GOD IS IMPARTIAL]

*All beings are equal in my eyes. There is none especially hateful to me, nor one who is especially dear to me. But all those who worship me with devotion are in Me, and so am I in them. **Gita 9.29***

[THERE IS HOPE FOR EVERYONE]

*Even if a person of the vilest conduct starts worshipping me with single-minded devotion, he too must be counted amongst the good, because he has resolved well. **Gita 9.30***

[GOD SAVES ANYONE WHO
APPROACHES HIM]

*Whosoever takes refuge in me, even if they are lowly born (due to the sins of their previous lives), and be they women, or Vaishyas or Shudras – they will all attain the Highest Goal. **Gita 9.32***

[TRUE DEVOTION IS MORE
IMPORTANT THAN EXTERNALS]

*Whosoever offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or even water – that offering of love, of the pure of heart I accept eagerly. **Gita 9.26***

[MANY WAYS TO REACH GOD –
FREEDOM OF WORSHIP]

*In whatsoever way men approach Me, even so do I bless them. For whichever path that men make take in worship, they will all come to Me. **Gita 4.11***



[WHOM DOES GOD LOVE?]

*He who has no hatred for any living being, who is friendly and also compassionate instead, who is free of the feeling of 'I' and 'mine', even minded in pleasure and pain and ever forgiving and forbearing. **Gita 12.13***

*He who is alike to enemy and friend, also to good or bad reputation; He who is the same in pleasure or pain, in heat or cold and who is free from all attachments. **Gita 12.18***

*He who considers insult and praise alike, who is silent (restrained in speech), content with whatever comes his way (through his own effort), has no abode (i.e., is not tied to home or family) and is firm in mind and full of devotion – that man is extremely dear to me. **Gita 12.19***

[LIVING ETHICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY]

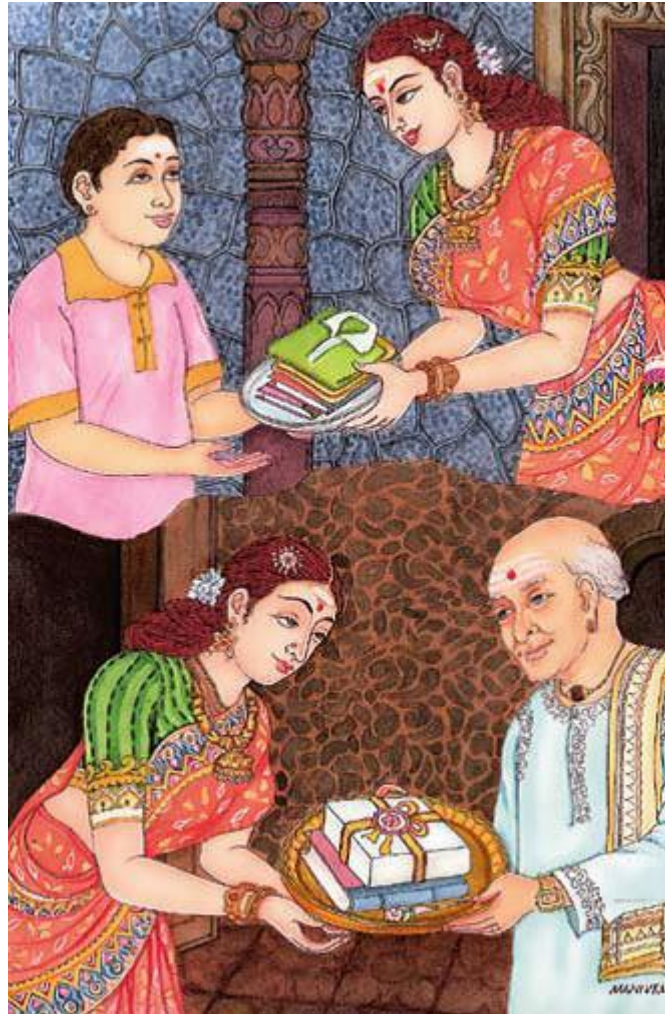
*Absence of fear, purity of mind, steadfastness in the path of meditation, Charity, control over one's sense organs, performance of Vedic sacrifices, study of Holy Scriptures, austerity and straightforwardness... **Gita 16.1***

Ahimsa, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of backbiting or crookedness, compassion towards all creatures, absence of covetousness, gentleness, modesty

*(decency), absence of fickleness (or immaturity).... **Gita 16.2***

*Vigor and energy, forgiveness, fortitude, cleanliness, absence of hatred and no exaggerated self-opinion – These belong to the One who is born to achieve Divine Wealth, O Bhārata. **Gita 16.3***

*Ostentation, arrogance, excessive pride and a tendency to demand respect, anger, harshness and indeed ignorance – these are the endowments of him who is born with the demoniac wealth. **Gita 16.4***



[LAW OF KARMA, FREEDOM IS OUR TRUE DESTINY]

*Divine wealth leads to Freedom, whereas the demoniac wealth results in bondage. Do not grieve, because you are born naturally with the divine wealth (and therefore destined for freedom). **Gita 16.5***

[CONTROL YOUR WANTS TO ATTAIN
PEACE AND HAPPINESS]

*He attains peace into whom all desires enter
as waters enters the ocean, which filled from
all sides, remains unmoved; but not to him
who wants to have (more and more) desires.*

Gita 2.70

[PRACTICE MODERATION IN ALL
THINGS]

*Meditation (Yoga) becomes the destroyer of
sorrow for him whose food (eating habits)
and recreation are temperate, whose efforts
and activities are controlled, and whose
sleep and waking are regulated. **Gita 6.17***

[ENGAGE WITH GOOD, DISENGAGE
FROM EVIL]

*Arjuna, without doubt, the mind is difficult
to discipline because it is restless. But it can
be restrained through constant engagement*

*in good things (abhyāsa) and constant detachment from bad things (vairāgya). **Gita 6.35***

[SCRIPTURAL TEACHINGS SHOULD BE OUR GUIDE IN OUR ACTIONS]

*Let scripture be the means by which you determine what should be done and what should not be done. After knowing the commands of the scripture, it is your obligation to perform your duties while you live in this world. **Gita 16.24***

[GOD SETS AN EXAMPLE THROUGH DIVINE INCARNATIONS]

*Whenever there is a decline of Dharma and ascendancy of Adharma, I bring Myself into being, i.e., I assume a physical body. **Gita 4.7***

To protect the virtuous, destroy the evil doers and to re-establish the rule of

Dharma, I come into being in every age.
Gita 4.8

[WE TOO SHOULD SET AN EXAMPLE
FOR OTHERS]

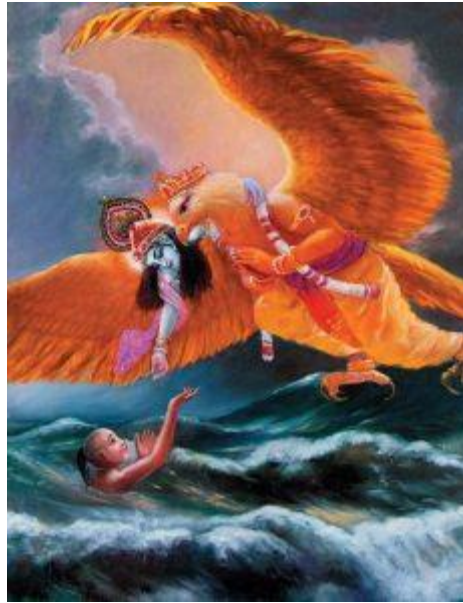
*Whatsoever a great man does, the same is
done by others. Whatever standard he sets,
the world follows. Gita 3.21*

[DO YOUR DUTY WITH A HIGHER
PURPOSE]

*The unlearned performs their duties from
attachment to their work. Therefore, the
wise and learned too should perform their
duties, but without any attachment and only
with the desire to promote harmony and
welfare in the world. Gita 3.25*

[BE STRONG, BELIEVE IN SELF-HELP]

*Let a man lift himself by himself; because we alone are our own friend and we are also our own enemy. **Gita 6.5***



[DO YOUR DUTY SELFLESSLY,
WITHOUT EXPECTING REWARDS]

*You have control over doing your duty alone, and never on the fruit of your actions. Therefore, do not live or do your duty that is merely motivated by fruits of your actions. And do not let yourself get drawn into the path of non-action. **Gita 2.47***

[TAKE PRIDE IN WHATEVER YOU DO]

*One should not give up the work suited to one's nature, though it may be defective, for all enterprises are clouded by defects, just as fire is covered with smoke. **Gita 18.48***

[ALL WORK IS IMPORTANT]

*One's duty, even if devoid of merit, is better than the duty of another, well done. Doing action ordained by one's own nature, one does not incur any sin. **Gita 18.47***

[CORRECT MENTAL ATTITUDE IN DOING OUR DUTY]

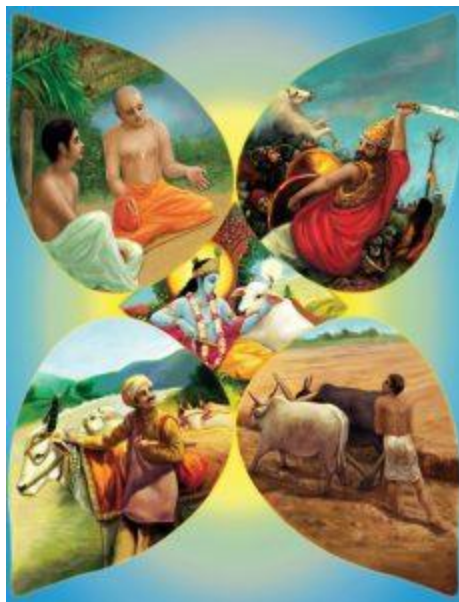
*Steadfast in Yoga, and abandoning attachments, perform your actions and duties. Face all accomplishments and failures with an even mind, because yoga means evenness of mind. **Gita 2.48***

[WHEN WORK BECOMES WORSHIP]

*(For a person who is immersed in spirituality) The act of offering is Brahman. The offering itself is Brahman. By Brahman is it offered into the fire, which is Brahman too. He who realizes Brahman while performing all actions, indeed reaches Brahman. **Gita 4.24***

[WE ARE INSTRUMENTS OF GOD]

*The Lord resides in the hearts of all beings, causing them to revolve (i.e., go about their tasks) through his Māyā as if they were mounted on a machine. **Gita 18.61***



[GOD’S PROMISE TO US]

*Abandoning completely all duties (i.e., dedicating them to Me), seek refuge in Me alone. I will liberate you from all evil, therefore do not grieve. **Gita 18.66***

[SPREAD THE GOOD WORD]

*He who teaches this most exalted and supreme secret – this scripture (Gita) to My devotees, while having the highest devotion to Me, will come to Me alone – let there be no doubt about this. **Gita 18.68***

Arjuna said:

*O Lord! You are Imperishable, the Supreme Being that we should seek to know. You are the ultimate shelter of the entire universe. You are the relentless protector of eternal Dharma. I believe that You are that Being Who has existed since eternity. **Gita 11.18***

By Your grace, my delusion is gone; and I have gained recognition of who I am and what is my duty. I now stand firm with my doubts dispelled and will do as You say.

Gita 18.73

[\[1\]](#) In our times, this viewpoint is seen in the writings of India's Marxist historians such as D D Kosambi, D N Jha, R S Sharma, Romila Thapar etc.